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KAZAKH CINEMA AND THE NATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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(MA)**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Glasgow

School of Culture and Creative Arts

Centre for Cultural Policy Research

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Abstract

Nation building is the process in question. This process is, as a rule, complicated in diverse countries, such as Kazakhstan. As a post-Soviet nation, it is still not sure how to define itself in the country and in the outside world. The crisis of the Kazakh identity is compromised by the manifold ethnic groups and cultures, juxtaposed by the clashes of Kazakh and Russian languages and different identities. In this regard, the role of cinema in the need for cultural certainty and the systematisation of national identity cannot be underestimated. Film is one way of offering knowledge of the nation to itself. Through cinema it is possible to imagine the history of the nation and construct modernity and to rebuild the nation.

The current study investigates Kazakh cinema in transition. This thesis, for the first-time, provides an assessment of Kazakh cinema production after the adoption of the new Cinema Law (2019) and the Eurasia International Film Festival (EurIFF) within a nation-building context. Also, little work using a theoretical framework has been done on the relationship between Kazakh film and nation building within the wider discussion of nationalism. This thesis adds to this small body of work by addressing Kazakh cinema's role in nation building.

Through the analysis of Kazakh films framed through Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolism concept, this thesis will look at how Kazakhstan is trying to define itself through cinema, how Kazakh films aid the country to reconstruct itself. In order to critically analyse the current Kazakh cinema landscape, this thesis has adopted a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with 30 participants residing in the Kazakhstani cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan.

After carrying out my research in relation to the literature on nationalism and film studies, the analysis of the data establishes four primary themes. Firstly, I investigate Kazakh film policy, focusing on the way the Cinema Law may reshape the film industry in the country. Secondly, I consider the significance of the Eurasia International Film Festival (EurIFF) as well as the unusual challenges that this state-run festival had to face in order to organise itself effectively. The third theme explores the curation and programming of the festival, examining the festival's approach to its audience and palette of films. Finally, in the fourth theme I demonstrate the influence of the film industry on both Kazakh cinema and the EurIFF with respect to image building.

Today, not many countries have successful cases of nation building through films. Kazakhstan is no exception. I conclude that Kazakh cinema and film policy is situated in between the discords of the old system (Kazakhfilm) and the new (the State Centre for Support of National Cinema). This thesis shows that the impact of Kazakh cinema on nation building is limited. Ultimately, I argue that if Kazakhstan had a stronger business-oriented approach to film policy, both domestic and international markets would be more reachable. As a result, cinematic nation building in Kazakhstan would be more successful.

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Dedication

In loving memory of my mother, Mariyam Hakimova, whose care and love I will carry through my whole life and never forget.

Assel Kamza
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Author's Declaration

This thesis represents the original work of Assel Kamza unless otherwise stated in the text. The research on which it was based was carried out at the University of Glasgow under the academic supervision of Professor Philip Schlesinger and Dr Lynn Whitaker during the period October 2017 to January 2021.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ABC	American Broadcasting Company
AFCI	Association of Film Commissioners International
APK	Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan
BAFTA	British Academy of Film and Television Arts
BFI	British Film Institute
CIFF	Copenhagen International Film Festival
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DW	Deutsche Welle
EC	Expert Council
EurIFF	Eurasia International Film Festival
FAMU	Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague
FCR	Festa del Cinema di Roma
FIAPF	International Federation of Film Producers' Associations
FIPRESCI	International Federation of Film Critics
FTC	Film Tax Credit
GFF	Gdynia Film Festival
JSC	Joint stock company
MAI	Monthly accounting index
MCH	Ministry for Culture and Heritage of New Zealand

MCS	Ministry of Culture and Sport
MFA	Ministry for Foreign Affairs
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of New Zealand
MIFF	Moscow International Film Festival
MRC	Movie Research Company
NETPAC	Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema
NZFC	New Zealand Film Commission
RK	The Republic of Kazakhstan
SCSNC	State Centre for Support of National Cinema
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars of the USSR
TAT	Tourism Board of Thailand
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UKFC	UK Film Council
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VGIK	Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography
ZIFF	Zanzibar International Film Festival

1 Introduction

This thesis will examine nation building and the role of cinema within Kazakhstan by focusing on post-Soviet films and reforms in film policy in transition. Its purpose is to explore the complicated relationship between government bodies and filmmakers and the overall impact of these tensions on nation building. The aim is to apply this theme to the study of film policy as a dimension of cultural policy.

In order to understand film policy in Kazakhstan, this thesis explores the role of key actors and relevant legislative acts. As is detailed in subsequent chapters, the new model of Kazakh cinema production after the reform of the cinema industry is studied in relation to the old model. This thesis looks at Kazakh cinema as “a useful analytical lens to reveal the political and contentious nature of nation-building” (Isaacs, 2018, p.253). The old Soviet system coexists with a reformed system of film policy in Kazakhstan. In other words, archaic traditions reflecting an old-style Kazakh mentality of tribalism, corruption, and bureaucracy do not accept the new, post-Soviet, film policy with its cardinal reforms. Secondly, this thesis brings to light the fact that different forces such as government bodies and film producers are fighting each other over who controls the system. This thesis will argue that cinema has been, and is, a nation-building instrument for both Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan in uniting the Kazakh nation and in helping the nation to self-define. However, I argue that this power struggle between the old and new systems does not allow the film industry to progress rapidly.

This thesis will find that there is an attempt to modernise and to reach the market outside Kazakhstan by a small expansion of the distribution system. If Kazakhstan could have gotten rid of the film industry’s old institutions, the domestic and international markets would have been more easily accessible. As a result, the country’s image would be much more perceptible.

1.1 Why does cinematic nation building matter?

The notion of nation building in Kazakhstan became very distinct and relevant following independence in 1991. The country was one of the most vulnerable countries in social, economic and cultural terms. Initially, the country struggled with poverty, the establishment of its own currency and an economic crisis. The dissolution of the USSR left Kazakhstan a country known for little apart from a Soviet stigma. Since the end of the 1990s, it has attempted to gain leverage as a Eurasian country positioned on the two continents, working through its Turkic, Muslim, Nomad, and post-Soviet identities. It can be said that this Central Asian country had no alternative but to define itself within ethnically derived nationalism in the 21st century, given its specific ethnic composition (Saunders, 2007, p.227). As it has over 130 ethnic groups and over 60 per cent of them are Kazakh (www.stat.gov.kz), multiethnicity became a crucial factor in the decision-making process of political, social, and cultural policy (see Figure 5). That is why the “construction of national-self” (Isaacs, 2018, p.1), the so-called national self-identification in the post-Soviet period, was problematic, given Kazakhstan’s diverse cultures. Moreover, as a post-colonial nation, Kazakhstan also has its own distinctive traits, having inherited a complex political system and language. Tensions between the Kazakh and Russian languages go hand in hand with the transition into the state’s new regime in 2019-2020, which resulted in a new political and social situation.

So, Kazakhstan faced a two-way challenge: creating its image internally (within the country) and promoting it externally (globally) as “film has indeed become a subtle yet powerful tool for dissemination of a nation’s self-image domestically and internationally” (Yunis, 2014, p.50). Here one can clearly see the connection between the interrelated processes in the projection of the nation, so to speak, in nation branding and nation building (Waśkiel, 2019). Therefore, film is a tool for the projection of nationhood to local and foreign audiences at the same time. On the one hand, the reputation of a country plays a vital role in its “progress and prosperity” (Anholt, 2010, p.2), in social, political, economic, and cultural terms. On the other hand, as Mikos (2014, p.410) argues, “people use films to shape their own identities as well as their social relations”. Here one can see that nation building through films underpins people to self-define,

whereas the image created during this self-definition affects the nation-building process.



Figure 1 The map of Kazakhstan. www.voanews.com.

Despite its rich historical background, few countries know about Kazakhstan's geographical location, which is one of the fundamental problems (Waśkiel, 2019) (see Figure 1). That is why for a country that has a bad reputation, or does not have any, it is hardly ever possible for it to compete on the world stage to attract international attention (van Ham, 2001). Whenever Kazakhstan was presented in Western media through clichés such as yurts, the vast steppe, the Aral Sea disaster and the Baikonur Cosmodrome (Fauve, 2015), marketing “the self” was essential. As one of five new “Stans” in Central Asia (see Figure 1),¹ Kazakhstan's case has become even more complicated by “brand confusion” in the global arena (Saunders, 2008, p.67). The whole spectrum of Kazakhstan's population feels uncomfortable when the country is classified alongside Afghanistan to the south due to its very different history and socio-economic development (Ibid). In an attempt to escape being associated with instability and terrorism, in 2014, the former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, during a visit to the Atyrau region to meet with the local community, suggested changing

¹ Not to mention Afghanistan, Pakistan, as well as other sub-national units in the world, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Karakalpakstan.

the name Kazakhstan to *Kazak Eli* (State of the Kazakhs) (Azattyq, 2014). Although discussed in social media by social activists, his proposal was not widely accepted or developed further publicly (Waśkiel, 2019). This leaves the potential renaming of the country up in the air, with the likelihood of possible change in the future, and further “brand” confusion along with it.

However, as Kotler and Gertner (2002, p.250) point out, states which do not deliberately brand their country can still produce and generate perceptions in people’s minds, even if they are negative. For example, for many, just mentioning Turkmenistan, North Korea, or Sudan immediately suggests dictatorships. On the other hand, positive perceptions or images can push people to buy, invest or travel. In this respect, the media and the entertainment industry, and cinema in particular, play a vital role in shaping public perceptions of a country (Kotler and Gertner, 2002, p.251; Waśkiel 2019, p.52). In this respect, Kazakhstan became vulnerable after the release of the *Borat* mockumentary.

Sasha Baron Cohen’s 2006 film, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* undermined Kazakhstan’s efforts to establish an international reputation, although previously the country had treated its international image carelessly (see section 2.6.3). The information war between the country’s officials and Cohen continued for a couple of years. Since then, no amount of money could enable the Kazakhstan authorities to rid the country of associations with the film’s eponymous fictional journalist character, Borat. The image of the country was hit, and Kazakhstan was categorised as a “laughable nation” in academic literature (Saunders, 2017, p.159). On the other hand, the fictitious Borat may also have turned Kazakhstan into an international brand (Marat, 2009). Or, to put it another way, the film helped the country’s cinema to develop and became free advertising for tourism.

In order to understand the Kazakhstani nation-building context, it is crucial to explain the political and institutional system and how state bodies undertake specialised tasks, such as cultural policy.

1.2 Political institutionalisation and cultural policy in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is an oil- and gas-rich authoritarian state. The presidential system and hierarchical and vertical institutionalisation of authority duplicates the power distribution under the Communist Party. Those who were the leaders of the Central Committees of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union became the first presidents of the independent republics of Central Asia: Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenistan), Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan) and Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan) (Isaacs, 2011). After the collapse of the USSR, Nazarbayev ruled the state for almost three decades, which can be called the Nazarbayev era. The cult of personality, similar to neighbouring Turkmenistan, appears in naming streets, the capital city, the international university and the airport after him as well as erections of monuments across Kazakhstan. According to Isaacs (2010), Nazarbayev was regarded as *Papa, Elbasy* [Head of the nation], Father of the Kazakhstani nation, who was capable of facing the challenges of building an independent state. Also, he was seen as a symbol of the nation, a warrant of stability, prosperity and peace.

Nazarbayev's resigning in March 2019 can be seen as a "half-departure" (Isaacs, 2020, p.5), because he still has political control as Chairman of the Security Council and remains the central figure in the country. His long-term presidency allowed Nazarbayev to adjust the political system in the country to his interests and those of his closest allies (Zhiltsov and Zonn, 2019). The opposition movements and mass media which criticise his power are subject to repression.

The legislative power of the state is exercised by two chambers of parliament: *Mazhilis* - a lower chamber, and the Senate - an upper chamber. The *Mazhilis* consists of 107 deputies, 98 of whom are elected from party lists. Nine deputies are chosen by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK) within the APK itself (see below). The Senate deputies are elected by the deputies of regional, district and city *Maslikhats* (local representative bodies) on the basis of indirect election, not by ordinary voters (two representatives from each region, capital, and two major cities) (Konstitutsiya Respubliki Kazahstan, 1995). Fifteen members are appointed by the president. The term of office of *Mazhilis* deputies

is five years, whereas Senate deputies are in office for six years (www.parlam.kz).

The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan - a unique institution in the post-Soviet world - is fully funded by the state. Established by Nazarbayev in 1995, it represents the interests of more than 800 ethnic and cultural associations in the country (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013). The APK's activity is regulated by the Law on the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (2008 with the amendments in 2018 and 2020), which states as its aim that it "ensures effective interaction of state bodies, organisations and civil society in the field of interethnic relations, creating favourable conditions for further strengthening social harmony and national unity" (Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan ob Assamblee Naroda Kazahstana, 2020). Permitting the APK nine seats in Parliament, which was possible after a number of amendments to the constitution in 2007, can be considered as an attempt to regulate interethnic relations by the Nazarbayev regime (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013). On one hand, this significantly increased the social and political role of the APK, which is, nonetheless, totally subordinate to the current political regime. On the other hand, it can be assumed that sharing constitutional power with the APK was done not only to keep interethnic harmony, but to secure the electoral votes of more than 130 ethnic minorities for the ruling regime in Kazakhstan (see section 2.2.3 and Figure 5).

Furthermore, the guaranteed representation of the APK members in parliament without the requirement of meeting a seven per cent threshold in election goes against real political competition. The general electorate does not vote for APK candidates, instead APK members select their candidates on a separate day. This creates an imbalance of power, competitiveness, and decision-making.

The electoral system does not allow for individuals or self-nominated candidates to participate in elections. However, the establishment of a party is complicated. Parties are allowed to register if they have at least 600 members in each of 14 regions (Isaacs, 2011). Since 1999, the party system has been dominated by the ruling *Nur Otan* (Light of Fatherland), the party of power. *Nur* is the first syllable of Nazarbayev's name - Nursultan. After previously being called *Otan*, the party became *Nur Otan* in 2006 and it was soon fashionable to

rename companies, firms, and schools in the same way to show commitment and loyalty to the ruling regime.

Other parties in Kazakhstan, independent from the president, are based on factional groups of elites. They represent and protect business and/or political interests of factional elite groups, or alternatively provide a platform for a personal ambition of a famous public figure. (Isaacs, 2011, p.40)

These “puppet” parties were set up only to give the impression that Kazakhstan has a multiparty system. They do not have a stable and continuous nature as in the USA, the United Kingdom or Germany. For instance, by 2008, parties on the political landscape were divided into: “pro-presidential” - *Rukhaniyat* (Rebirth), the Party of Patriots; “soft” - *Adilet* (Justice), *Ak Zhol* (Bright Path), *Auyl* (Village), the Communist Party of Kazakhstan; and “hard” opposition - the All-National Social Democratic Party and *Alga* (Forward) (Bowyer, 2008). Most of them were set up and disintegrated or combined with others in a short period of time and did not last long.

Since the last parliamentary elections in 2016, the *Nur Otan* party won almost as many seats as in previous votes, with 84 members out of 107 in the parliament. The two other parties, *Ak Zhol* and the Communist People’s Party, won seven seats each. When it comes to making decisions, the latter two never contradict *Nur Otan* on the majority of issues. The other three registered parties - the National Social Democratic Party, *Auyl* and *Birlilik* (Unity) could not cross the 7 per cent threshold for seats (BTI country report, 2020). The case when no deputies voted against the law could be seen during the discussion of the Cinema Law in September 2018 (see section 4.1).

One may argue that the *Mazhilis* and the entire political system of Kazakhstan is closely connected with clan identity. Deputies work for the various interests of groups on behalf of clans and rich oligarchs (see section 2.5). Real oppositional parties do not exist and the country can be described as “hyper-presidential” (Ambrosio and Lange, 2015, p.539). As Isaacs (2011, pp.36-37) notes, “the law is construed by officials at the Ministry of Justice in such a way as to impede the registration process of political parties that the ruling regime is wary of seeing active in the political process. The law is applied in an active sense to deter the

formation of political parties which oppose the current regime of Nursultan Nazarbayev.” Therefore, the parliament lacks independence.

Nonetheless, Kazakhstan is trying to take tiny steps towards democratic nation-building. The second president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, made several amendments to the legislation in 2019 providing the introduction of parliamentary opposition and a 30 per cent quota in party lists for youth and women (Vlast.kz, 2020). Six parties were registered in Kazakhstan for the *Mazhilis* elections in 10-11 January, 2021: *Nur Otan*, *Auyl*, *Adal* (Honest, formerly *Birlik*), *Ak Zhol* (White Path), the National Social Democratic Party and the People’s Party (formerly the Communist People’s Party) (Kumenov, 2020).

In 2017, radical constitutional reform was implemented in Kazakhstan, which was supposed to shift some responsibilities from the president to the executive power - government and parliament. For example, ministers can be removed from office by parliament. Also, the president must appoint the ministers at the prime minister’s recommendation. However, these amendments have not been realised in practice (BTI country report, 2020).

The objectives of cultural policy are determined by the “two presidents” - the “Tokayev-Nazarbayev tandem” (Isaacs, 2020, p.2) - and announced in live, annual addresses to the Kazakhstani people as well as through comprehensive and extensive articles in the media. These addresses are transformed into planned goals, which are implemented by the ministries and local *Akimats* (city councils). Government, on the basis of these presidential speeches and articles, introduced several concepts and projects, such as Kazakhstan: 2030, *Mangilik El* (Eternal Nation) and the Top 50 Developed States, which provided directions for the course of development in different spheres (Sharipova, 2019). Another one of the most important programmes implemented by the state was Cultural Heritage (2004). Its goal was to research, restore and preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the country, reviving the historical and cultural traditions as well as promoting them abroad.

Kazakhstan started moving to adopt the Latin alphabet (see section 2.4) after Nazarbayev's article, *Course Towards the Future: Modernisation of Kazakhstan's Identity* in 2017. In this article Nazarbayev (2017, n.p.) states:

Hollywood played a major role in ensuring the success for the U.S. during the "cold war". If we want to be a nation with a unique place in the global map of the 21st century, we should implement one more project - Modern Kazakh Culture in the Global World. [...] Our national traditions and customs, language, music, and literature, in one word, our national spirit should remain with us forever. [...] When one talks about the impact of foreign ideological influences, we should keep in mind these cover certain values, cultural symbols of other nations. Only our own national symbols can oppose them.

Here, Smith's concept of ethno-symbolism, described in section 2.1, is pertinent. Cultural policy is based on the difference of national values. Kazakh nation building is evolving through national symbols. All these symbols can be found in cinema, which has been used to decolonise the Kazakh memory that was heavily influenced by Soviet and Russian culture.

On the basis of the above-mentioned article, the government developed the programme *Rukhani Zhangyru* (Spiritual Modernisation) (Burkhanov, 2020). One of the tasks that was set up was the creation of the National Digital Film Collection Film Fund. The film fund keeps 7,010 units of films produced by the Kazakhfilm studio. It has 15,122 units altogether, including the archives on CIS countries and other foreign films (anonymous interviewee, personal correspondence, February 2019). This task has been implemented by the Kazakh Research Institute of Culture over three years and was a part of the Digital Kazakhstan (2017) national programme as well. Also, Kazakh Cinema days were held in the USA and Italy with the screening of seven domestic films within the Spiritual Modernisation programme (Inform.kz, 2018).

The role of biographical films as a part of nationalistic discourse in constructing the nation is enormous (Kumar, 2014). 'Biopic', an anglo-american term, can be described as one of the earliest genres in the history of cinema (Landy, 2010). According to Bingham's (2010, p.10) analysis, it is a "genuine, dynamic genre and an important one" that has come to define the Hollywood era. In the 1930s, the biopic, as a source of historical facts, acquired a new appeal more associated with genres such as epics, gangster films, war films and westerns

(Landy, 2010), as cinema became more commercialised (Vidal, 2010). As Kumar (2014, p.39) puts it, by using different narrative strategies such as ‘otherness’, visualisation of national boundaries, ‘glorification of hyper-masculinity’ and thematic concerns, contemporary biopics deliver the ‘myth of nationhood’ and a feeling of national pride.

The personality cult described earlier still persists in Kazakh cinema through biographical pictures dedicated to Nazarbayev. Sheehan (2010, pp.35-36) lucidly discusses how living personalities filled the entire genre of biopics after 2005:

A recent surge of biographical pictures have cast living figures into a genre heretofore reserved for dead ones, displacing the present from itself through a historicizing representation that remembers the still-living. [...] The coincidence of the present as both past and enduring within these films, elaborates the collapsed distance between the actual and information that attains its own reality: a collapse that ultimately accounts for the fatalism in each narrative.²

These narratives of ‘instant’ biopics (Ibid) of still-living figures are present in the films about Nazarbayev. By the order of the presidential administration, the Ministry of Culture and Sport, along with Kazakhfilm, produced six extremely expensive feature films: *The Sky of My Childhood* (2011) biopic portrays his childhood. The follow-up to this feature was a series of four epics. *The Leader’s Way: Fiery River* (2013) tells the story of the student years of Nazarbayev and the formation of his personality. *The Leader’s Way: Iron Mountain* (2013) tells the story of Nazarbayev’s career path from simple metallurgist to secretary of the party committee of the metallurgical plant in Karagandy. *Breaking the Vicious Circle* (2014) describes how he went into politics and made efforts to solve the burning issues of the industry at the formation stage. The last in the series, *The Stars Have Aligned* (2016), depicts the rise of Kazakhstan from 1984 to 1991, accentuating the president’s role in gaining independence and his initiatives. The final feature, *The Leader’s Way, Astana* (2018) is a story of the construction of the new capital, Astana. In the film, Nazarbayev’s proposal to move the capital faces opposition and indignation in Almaty. Despite this, the government works

² Films in this category are *The Queen* (2006) about Queen Elizabeth II, and *W.* (2008), portrayal of George W. Bush by Oliver Stone (Sheehan, 2010).

hard to relocate the capital to the provincial town, Akmola (see sections 2.1 and 2.2.3). Currently, Kazakhfilm is working on a sequel *The Leader's Way: At the Epicenter of the World*, started in 2018. The film will describe the history of development of the young capital, Astana, from 1994 to present day. It is a rare example in world cinema of six biopics in a row being dedicated to the same person. The scripts of both films were written by Adilbek Dzhaksybekov, graduate of VGIK, the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, who worked as head of the presidential administration between 2016 and 2018. Thus, cinema as a nation-building tool draws the elite's attention in Kazakhstan. A second interesting fact is that the actor who played Nazarbayev's role in the films *The Leader's Way: Fiery River* (2013), *The Leader's Way: Iron Mountain* (2013) and *Breaking the Vicious Circle* (2014), Nurlan Alimzhanov, became a *Mazhilis* deputy after being awarded the title of Honoured Worker, continuing his career on the Committee for Social and Cultural Development. Therefore, from these examples, one can see the interaction between Kazakh cinema and nation building. If "the biopic is a form that itself is about self-identification and self-invention [...] it is also about identification with others" (Bingham, p.378), by portraying Nazarbayev's life, the ruling power aims to reinvent and reimagine the history of the whole nation as 'life-writing cannot be separated from nation-writing' (Vidal, p.23).

For the films about the new capital, the producers invited the British make-up artist Mark Coulier, Oscar and BAFTA winner for *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and *The Iron Lady* (2011) to replicate the exact make-up, hair styles and costumes of particular political figures of 1990s Kazakhstan. These facts support Vidal's (2010, p.11) argument that "the biopic trades on a sense of authenticity". Consequently, the budget of the above films is extremely high. For example, the government allocated ₸³ 2.3 billion (which is over \$6.8 million, or £4,113,900)⁴ just for the last film, *The Leader's Way: at the Epicentre of the World* (Azarov, 2017). This is more than one third of the annual budget, ₸7.5 billion, (\$17,615,640, or £13,467,000) requested by the Ministry of Culture and Sport for film production during the defence of the Cinema Law in parliament in

³ The symbol of Kazakhstan's currency – tenge.

⁴ I have calculated all amounts in USD (\$) and GBP (£) at the prevailing rate.

September 2018 (see section 4.2.2). The deputies of *Mazhilis* described the annual budget for the production of new films as “too much”, whereas just one film about the authoritarian leader was funded without any obstacles or discussion by the government.

Reproducing myths about the nation’s founding fathers is one way of narrating the story of the nation (Kumar, 2014). In the Soviet Union, movies served as the main tool of propaganda and the ‘monstrous “cult of personality”’ developed in pictures such as *Lenin in October* (1937), *Lenin in 1918* (1939) and *The Fall of Berlin* (1949). Moreover, since the 1940s, every Soviet film had to include the visual image of Stalin (Christie, 2002, pp.294-295). A parallel example is South Korean heroic biopics that demonstrate the success and performance of leaders who save the nation from foreign invasion or starvation (Hwang, 2010). Similarly, the biopics of Kazakhstan’s cinema created and promoted Nazarbayev’s image as saviour of the Kazakhs. The Kazakhstani government intended to make people reimagine Kazakh history in the way the ruling powers wanted them to. One example can be found in the scene on the uprising against Russian ruler Gennadiy Kolbin in 1986 (see section 2.2.1) in the film *The Stars Have Aligned* (2016), where Nazarbayev is shown as compassionate to rebels, which is disputable. In fact, Nazarbayev went out into a crowd and asked them to disperse, saying that he supported Kolbin’s appointment. After these words, he was pelted with snowballs (Akiner, 1995, p.55). The true story of the protest is only shown in *Allazhar* released in 1993 (see section 2.6.1), which was banned in Kazakhstan. This is an example of what Kumar (2014, p.41) would describe as ‘historical (re) writing’ through the subjective lens of the figure’s individual accomplishments. Although one may argue that, “at the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker’s own version of truth” (Bingham, 2010, p.10), this genre can be problematic in Kazakhstan because, as Vidal (2010, pp.1-2) concludes, as it is “often cavalier in its handling of historical fact and mired in its own sense of self-importance, the biopic commands as much critical derision as industrial visibility”. Hence, how close the above-mentioned biopics are to historical fact is controversial.

However, the main message that the authorities wanted to disseminate through this cult-of-personality film was the following: in the film a British journalist asks Nazarbayev how long he intends to remain as the head of Kazakhstan.

Nazarbayev answers: “As long as the people wish”. This message sounds like an excuse, in front of the world, for a long presidency.

1.3 New film policy in Kazakhstan

Given the government’s role is so central to nation building on so many levels, this is this study’s main focus. Isaacs (2018, p.15) argues that, “the government is using film as an ideological tool to present its interpretation of history and its vision of Kazakhstan’s nationhood to domestic and international audiences”. But how successful is such an ideological policy? It was difficult to answer this question until Kazakhstan adopted its Cinema Law and launched a new State Centre for Support of National Cinema (SCSNC) to operate the film policy in Kazakhstan in 2019. After that, the issue of using cinema in nation building became more relevant because film has really started to occupy a central place in Kazakhstan’s cultural policy as one of the vehicles to create a national representation of a way of life.

1.4 Research aims and objectives

Kazakh cinema is not a new object of study. Up until now, in the literature - because of the earlier need to assert Kazakhstan’s independence - few researchers considered Kazakh cinema from a nation-building perspective (Isaacs, 2015; 2016; 2018; Abikeyeva, 2006; 2013). Thus, little attention has been paid to the projection of Kazakhstan through cinema (except Waśkiel, 2019; Yessenova, 2011; Yessenova, 2015) within a wider nation-building discourse or how Kazakhstan can be marketed through cinema. Put differently, cinema’s influence on the country’s image as a part of nation building at both a domestic and an international level is unique but woefully neglected.

The scope of this thesis is the critical analysis of Kazakh cinema’s transition from when the country gained independence in 1991 up to 2020 and the launch and operation of a new body to regulate film policy in Kazakhstan. The aim of this thesis has been to investigate the modern Kazakh film landscape by gathering evidence from the film industry itself to see how the Kazakh nation is

constructed and imagined through film. The research has been carried out by using a case study approach. Kazakh cinema itself will act as a broad case study, the umbrella, if you like, beneath which I will focus on my two specific case studies of Kazakh cinema production and the Eurasian International Film Festival (EurIFF). The studies will be considering various aspects of film such as features, distribution, management, and festival organisation.

A second aim is to explore the post-Soviet transition period of Kazakh film policy and the film industry itself, connecting past, present and future by applying theories of nationalism to the Kazakhstani situation. This part of the research has underpinned the understanding of the primary material as well as theoretical concepts used in this thesis (see Chapter 2).

Thirdly, it should be acknowledged that Kazakh cinema is often researched together with other Central Asian film industries (for instance, Abikeyeva 2001; 2003) given they share the same geographical region. Additionally, these studies tend to be descriptive, focusing on images of woman, man, child, and family in Kazakh films as well as on problems of film distribution. This has resulted in a restricted and limited view of Kazakh cinema. It is worth noting that the case of EurIFF, which is full of confusion and pitfalls, is also explored here from a nation-building perspective for the first time. There are no academic works on the Kazakh festival and its difference from other film events globally. This is an academic, theoretical gap which this thesis aims to fill. Furthermore, the combination of the above factors influenced the choice of the EurIFF as a second and illuminating case study.

This study seeks to shed light on the following three core research questions:

1. Who takes the decisions in the Kazakh cinema industry and who controls it?
2. To what extent does EurIFF contribute to nation building and the projection of the nation?
3. What is the role of Kazakh cinema in nation building?

To that end, a qualitative research method has been used. A case study approach as an empirical method was possible thanks to desk research, semi-structured interviews, observation, and field research (see Chapter 3).

1.5 Limitations

It is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all film genres in depth. It will only focus on a brief exploration of the main ones. Nor will it cover the representation of Kazakhstan in international movies (Frigerio, 2017). The only exception to this will be *Borat* because it affected the overall image of the country and influenced the course of its tourism policy (see section 2.6.3).

The focus of the research will be the period of the new millennium age. However, the Soviet and post-Soviet historical background will facilitate a more profound understanding of these two Kazakh case studies.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Following on from this introduction, Chapter 2 frames the research by reviewing theories of nationalism and attempts to define concepts of national cinema. In particular, it explores in detail the connection between nation and nation building, and between cinema and nation building. Also, the chapter will focus on the concepts of Hollywood's hegemony and the Kazakh state's policy of protecting the national market. Furthermore, I critique the relevant historical moments. I limit history to the most significant contemporary events.

Contentious issues such as the Kazakh language, national identity and religion will constitute part of a brief outline of the cultural context after Kazakhstan became an independent country in 1991. In addition, this chapter examines Kazakh cinema history to establish a historical, nation-building context to this Kazakh case study.

Chapter 3 explores the project's history and timeline before moving on to explain the qualitative methodology applied in this thesis. The chapter will justify the case-study approach and will explain the rationale behind using a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and a

research diary. After that, it lays out the obstacles and challenges, ethics, and approach to transcribing data in conducting the research.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the analysis stage of this study. It takes a close look at Kazakh cinema in transition, i.e., before and after January 2019, when the new Cinema Law took full effect and divided cinema's life in Kazakhstan into two parts: before and after. This chapter will uncover a number of themes: a comparison of the old and new systems of state funding and distribution; Kazakh cinema's lack of independence and, finally, the contradictory relations between cinema theatres and distributors. The chapter will also investigate the activity of the State Centre for Support of National Cinema (SCSNC), critically analysing the role of the Expert Council (EC) in the selection of potential projects for funding.

Chapter 5 looks at the specific case of EurlFF to consider factors that may have influenced festival development and ultimately nation building in Kazakhstan. The empirical evaluation of the festival looks closely at the event's various challenges, such as the late funding and announcement of its dates as well as moving the festival from traditional Almaty to the new capital, Astana, in 2017. It looks at the political, economic, and cultural reasons for this. As this thesis unfolds, this study opens up a discussion on how changing the venue of the event and renaming the capital Astana as Nur-Sultan in 2019 affected the image of the festival and, consequently, the projection of Kazakhstan itself.

The thesis then turns to the festival programme and audiences, with Chapter 6 considering how EurlFF functions in relation to its audience as well as the role of curators in selecting content. The chapter shifts its focus to how programming and audience perception has shaped Kazakhstan's image.

In Chapter 7, the final findings discuss the industry component of the festival and Kazakh cinema as a whole. It explains the role of the stakeholder, the SCSNC, in facilitating the film industry with tax-rebate schemes and launching new film commissions across the country. This chapter also includes an analysis of collaboration with international producers and co-production.

Chapter 8 concludes this thesis by highlighting its essential empirical findings and pulling together the main themes in the conceptual chapters in relation to the research questions. Then, it discusses the implications of the results. Finally, it covers the limitations of the study and possibilities for further research.

2 Reimagining Kazakh nationalism

Introduction

Theories of nationalism are relevant to the analysis of Kazakh cinema in transition. Taking the concept of ethno-symbolism as my starting point, I will review the relationship between nation building and theories of nationalism. I will argue that national identity, as a “visual representation” (Smith, 2002, p.45) of the nation, stands out in films with ethnic symbolism.

After, this the chapter will lay out the framework for the role of cinema in nation building in relation to the representation and image of the country. It is essential, at the same time, to place Kazakhstan in its historical context because history is “a crucial player in the construction of a nation” (Hayward, 2000, p.90). Therefore, this chapter will make an attempt to outline Kazakh nation-building history by examining the main historical events relevant to the creation of the Kazakh Khanate, as well as the history of pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Kazakhstan because these events influenced the construction of the nation and changed the consciousness of the Kazakh people.

Furthermore, this chapter will delineate Kazakh identity after 1991, paying attention to barriers that had to be overcome in the course of creating that national identity. The role of symbolism and language issues are also covered, given the influence they have on the cultural development of a country.

This chapter will next provide a detailed outline of the various stages of Kazakh cinema, concluding with the significant impact of the *Borat* mockumentary on Kazakhstan’s image.

2.1 Nation, cinema, and nation building

The term nation building was coined by American researchers (Karl Deutsch, Charles Tilly, Reinhard Bendix) in the 1950 and 1960s. Since then, it has often been used with concepts of nationalism, national consciousness, and national self-identification. Currently, there are several theories of nationalism that analyse the nation-building process (Abikeyeva, 2006). The key debate in nation building is between modernism, where the nation is seen as a political,

constructed concept (Ernest Gellner, Rogers Brubaker), and primordialism, where the nation is recognised as the primordial identity and the basis of social structures is ethnicity (Walker Connor, Anthony Smith). Connor (1994), per contra to modernists, defined nationalism based on ethno-primordial claims. He argued that post-colonial states had very strong ethnic identities. Indeed, I argue that the Kazakhs as a nation pre-date the USSR and the post-Soviet state. Accordingly, they have a strong ethnic identity that needs to be revived and rebuilt.

The most pertinent analysis of nationalism for this study is Anthony Smith's theory of ethno-symbolism. Smith's (1998, p.224) paradigm focuses on the social premises of nations. Opposed to Benedict Anderson (2006), the author of the concept "imagined communities", Smith sees nations as "reconstructed" rather than "constructed", by rediscovering of "ethno-symbolic repertoire for national ends", which include myths and memories and the collective destiny. This assumption can be seen more closely in Smith's (1991) earlier studies of the use of flags, currency, national clothes and anthems, the creation of monuments and ceremonies - all of these are reminders of people's cultural heritage. The strong ties between "ethnie" (Smith, 1995) and these symbols are encapsulated in the concept of ethno-symbolism. It is ethnic groups that circulate symbolism and in functional ways the symbols bring them together as a community. In other words, Smith (1991, 1995, 1998) accentuates cultural, mythological, and symbolic aspects of the nation-building process. Consequently, one can define nation building as "the process of constructing a shared sense of identity and common destiny, usually in order to overcome ethnic, sectarian, or communal differences and to counter alternate sources of identity and loyalty" (Fritz and Menocal, 2007, p.47).

To borrow from Smith (1998), the power of connection and the recognition of heroes and sagas with an assumed ethnic past, along with myths and folklore and emblems, are significant for the nationalist enterprise to be successful. The result of all this, he believes, is that the nation stays in a past which contours the future along with every aspect of a nation's sense of self. Similarly, for Renan (1990, p.19): "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present". This suggests the nation is connected both to the past and

present. As such, a nation's image and national identity is deeply rooted in history and culture. Hence, the ethnic history of the nation and its link with national destiny is the most powerful tool to support and project nationhood.

On the other hand, according to Smith (1998, p.191), symbols are “powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture and fate of the ethnic community”. This view stands in opposition to the other scholars in nationalism, who argue that the main identifiers of a nation can be language (Brubaker, 1996), literacy and written language (Gellner, 1983; 1994; Anderson, 2006), national identity (Cameron, 1999; Billig, 1995; Williams, 1999), and cultural identity (Schlesinger, 1991). The national sense of “self” and “other” and distinguishing “us” from “them” are crucial indicators in this national identification process (Miller, 1995; Guibernau, 2007; Hall, 1989; McCrone, 1998; Clampin, 1999). Bhabha (1990, p.4), whose understanding of nation rests upon cultural difference, adopts this distinct criterion of identification. He notes how the “cultural temporality of the nation”, means that the “‘other’ is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully within cultural discourse when we *think* we speak most intimately and indigenously ‘between ourselves’”. Similarly, Schlesinger's (1991) analysis of inclusion and exclusion describes a very distinct form of nation building which enables the country to clearly mark out its defining cultural values. Therefore, it can be argued that to identify oneself as a person involves differentiating the self from others. The same can be applied to nations finding their place on a world map.

In this sense the role of cinema in nation building is essential. Cinema fits into the theories of nationalism as a form of expression and representation of the nation. Rather than just being pertinent to a given nation, cinema would be central to the process of defining nations in general (Williams, 2002). Cinema may assist imaginings that support nation-states (Cummings, 2009; Isaacs, 2018). Moreover, it is what Smith (2002, p.45) describes as a “visual representation of national identity”. Therefore, cinema is a medium for expressing, shaping, and highlighting national identity, culture and heritage. In this regard, a national cinema reflects the prevailing culture and nation's sense of belonging. Such a cinema is one of the bridges between the “self” and “other”, and “us” and “them”. It is a medium for the construction of national identity on screen. This forms part of Elsaesser's (2005a, p.75) argument about how the nation is

“constructed” through “media memory”. Thus, cinema may form not only identity but the memory of the nation. In this case, national cinema is pertinent in forming both identity and memory. Moreover, cinema, especially national cinema, as a “constructed social phenomenon” (Isaacs, 2018, p.30) can be a medium of ideological impact, propaganda, and a dimension of cultural development. Here one can see the intersection between cinema as a visual representation of identity and Smith’s ethno-symbolism.

Secondly, the connection between nation and cinema can be found in film studies. Schlesinger (2000, p.29) highlights the sociological connection between nationhood and cinema acting as an “expression of the cultural geography of the nation-state”. This sums up the basic principle on which film studies have been based when it comes to sociological arguments about national identity and nationalism.

It is worth noting that European cinema developed in the context of the global dominance of Hollywood in the 20th century. Indeed, the context of the cinema industry often centres on Hollywood versus domestic markets. For example, Higson (1989, p.36) suggests that cinema is an industrial construction, where people can notice the difference between “national cinema” and a “domestic film industry”. It is also a way of representing narratives and images of the nation, which circulates and gives us a sense of difference. This underlines differentiation from Hollywood in the theory of national cinema. Schlesinger (2000, p.24), for instance, sees American production as a challenge:

It is precisely the extra-territorial cultural pressure of Hollywood’s production, imported into the national space, that sets up the contemporary issue of national cinema. This outside challenge to ideas of the national is at once interpreted as cultural, economic, and political as well as ideological.

Therefore, national cinema is an industry’s response to Hollywood. However, this tension exists not just between Hollywood and Europe but also much more globally, including such vulnerable countries as Kazakhstan.

Aside from the different interpretations of Hollywood hegemony, the stance by Schlesinger perpetuates the view that the outside challenge needs to be discussed in the national context to see the whole picture of local production.

Further to this, Higson argues that Hollywood's "over-domination" (1989, p.38) of local markets not only means the impoverishment of domestic filmmaking, but also flags up a need to examine national cinema in relation to local distribution, screening, consumption and audiences as well as the film production process itself. As cinema is described as both a medium and an industry (Willemen, 2006, p.41) and as a constructor of national identity (Morley and Robins, 1993), the approach of differentiating any given national cinema from Hollywood partly answers questions on the who, what and where of how films are made, which also answers questions of distribution and the screening of films.

In this regard, the case of Kazakhstan is interesting. One could argue that nation building for Kazakhstan was problematic. As a post-Soviet state, which has inherited ethnic diversity, it does not have a clear national identity. Both Russian and Kazakh, and other minor languages, coexist in a vast territory. The problem has been aggravated by the repatriated *Oralmans*, who do not speak the widespread Russian language, creating a split within one nation: Kazakhs, *Shala* Kazakhs (Russified Kazakhs), and returnees themselves (see section 2.2.3). Evaluating this issue from Wimmer's (2015) position, the nation-building process is weak. According to him, the less the linguistic diversity, the more it enhances nation building. This is not the case for Kazakhstan.

Given the plight of the Kazakh nation during the Soviet era, it is appropriate to engage with the concept of 'small nations'. Firstly, it is necessary to define what qualifies as a small nation. There are debates between scholars regarding the different measures of smallness which include: population (Bray & Packer, 1993; Vital, 1967), geographical scale (Olafsson, 1998; Gellner, 1996) and gross national product (Kuznets, 1960). This concept is not widely regarded by film scholars as a clearly articulated analytical point (Hjort & Petrie, 2007). For instance, Thompson & Bordwell (2019, p.67) examine the survival of film in "smaller producing nations". Yet another example is Danish cinema being viewed as 'minor cinema' by Hjort & Bondebjerg (2001, p.20) for the following reasons: the size of the population is low for a market-oriented domestic film industry; the Danish language is spoken only by Danes, which makes the export of these films problematic; and the challenge of American films. All of these factors are present in the contemporary Kazakh cinema landscape but with even more

uncertainty due to the issue of bilingualism and the dominance of the Russian language (see sections 1.1 and 2.1), coupled with the insufficient size of the Kazakhstani population to support a local film industry and the state's inability to recoup losses (see section 4.2.2) amid the ongoing threat of American films (see section 4.3).

Focusing on a comparative history of small nations and their nation-forming processes, Miroslav Hroch (1985) outlines a structural model for the periodisation of national movements as part of a complex nation-building process. He discusses the history of colonial rule in connection with this, writing:

We only designate as small nations those which were in subjection to a ruling nation for such a long period that the relation of subjection took on a structural character for both parties. (Hroch, 1985, p.9)

This echoes Olafsson's (1998) view that small nations have proliferated as a result of decolonisation. Inasmuch as Kazakhstan had been under the colonial regime of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union for 260 years (1731-1991), Hroch's measure of rule by non-co-nationals, in this case Russians, is one of the key arguments for defining a small nation insofar as it helps to capture the imperatives of nation building through film. This argument may usefully be applied to define Kazakhstan as a small filmmaking nation.

Also, the issue of nation versus city is central to the nation-building concept, and also relates to Kazakhstan's case. Hobsbawm (1992), in his studies on nationalism, underlines the decline of the nation-state and the growing interest in regions and cities. A city identity is not inferior to a country identity. A city represents the nation, as well as being a social constructor for nationhood (Therborn, 2006). Moreover, the identity of the city and nation building are linked on national level (Vale, 2011). One can argue that this is not the case for the countries which transfer their capital. Since the 1950s, 13 states in the world have relocated their capital. In 1997 Kazakhstan was the only post-Soviet state to move its capital from Almaty to Astana, a very rare occurrence in post-communist countries (Schatz, 2004b). If moving a capital city is an act of "symbolic import" that is "designed to highlight the state's place in the

international system” (Ibid, p.121), there was an attempt by Kazakhstan to embody Astana as a symbolic centre and to establish the country’s image.

Along with this, one of the options for Kazakhstan to reimagine and reconstruct its past was to turn to cinema. Norris (2012, p.384) describes Kazakhstan’s purpose in foregrounding its nomadic nationhood:

To help to build a new sense of nationhood and to articulate new historical narratives to the broadest possible audience, the Kazakh state also turned to cinema. Nazarbayev invested a great deal in the cinema industry, overseeing the reconstruction and re-emergence of Kazakhfilm, the largest film studio in Central Asia. Films have therefore become one of the primary sites where the past gets interpreted and ultimately an important place to examine for the emergence of nomadic nationhood.

Films, therefore, are instruments for the creation of a nomadic history and nationhood, and in Renan’s (1990) formulation, for reuniting the past with the present. Furthermore, historical films “provide ‘a historical map’ of the national past in order to bind the spectator more firmly to the present national identity” (Smith, 2000, p.52). Furthermore, Kazakh cinema is connected to the birth of the modern nation “as an analytical lens to explore the construction of representations of the nation over time and to account for how they evolve, adopt and are contested” (Isaacs, 2018, p.6). Analysing cinematic nation building in Kazakhstan, it is argued:

The concept of national cinema will allow for the analysis of such symbols [the symbols of traditions, history, and identity] within the wider discursive practice related to the production, distribution, market (domestic and global), technological development and reception of Kazakhstani films. The wider context includes the domestic film industry as well as its broader relationship to the international film business, but also, more importantly, the political background and role of the state in film production. (Ibid, p.20)

The above broader approach will be applied in the following chapters, paying attention to reforms in Kazakh film policy, including those launched in 2019 by the State Centre for Support of National Cinema (SCSNC). The centre aims to market Kazakhstan through cinema and film festivals in a way that the government controls. Also, there is an attempt at modernisation as well as an attempt to reach markets outside Kazakhstan. It becomes evident from the above discussion that national cinema as a projection of national identity, or as

a practical marketing tool to position the country, is one of the ways of portraying the country, shaping an image rooted in the country's history.

2.2 Kazakhstan's nation-building history

It is believed that the term *Qazaq* as a form of nomadic self-identification emerged during the formation of the Kazakh Khanate in the 15th century. Isaacs (2016, p.141) argues:

The ethno-genesis of the Kazakh people dates back to the 15th century when two tribal leaders, Zhanibek and Kerey Khan [see figure 2], united a number of disparate Uzbek-Turkic tribes and established the Kazakh Khanate.

The group consisted of Turkic-speaking nomadic tribes based on a common language, culture, way of life and social structure (Olcott, 1986). Kazakh was not an ethnicity but referred more to a person who led a free life-style (Dave, 2007).



Figure 2 The monument of Zhanibek and Kerey khans in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. www.el.kz.

Dave (2007), Hirsch (2005) and Sarsembayev (1999), in contrast to Olcott (1986), claim that nation building, taken in the modern sense of a sovereign independent state, did not truly begin until the early 20th century in Kazakhstan. This was during the short-lived Kazakh national government, formed

in the chaos of the civil war⁵ - the *Alash Orda*, founded by Kazakh intellectuals. It was a provisional and self-proclaimed Kazakh government led by Akhmet Baitursynov, Mirzhakyp Dulatov, Alikhan Bokeikhanov, and others educated in Russia (Kesici, 2017). From Kesici's (2017) point of view, the *Alash Orda* enabled Kazakh ethnicity to transform into a Kazakh state, as these Kazakh intellectuals were aiming to declare this newly formed government the ultimate power. It was an attempt to define the Kazakh land as an independent country.

The party that took on the name of *Alash* held an historical belief that this mythical figure had been the father of all three Kazakh *Zhuz* (see section 2.5 on tribalism). This idea is supported by Smith's (1995, p.155) argument: "the myths, memories, symbols and ceremonies of nationalism provide the sole basis for such social cohesion and political action as modern societies". Their attempt to unite all Kazakhs into this single *Alash* party transformed how Kazakhs defined themselves as a nation up to that point. Kazakh intellectuals "conceptualized Kazakh national identity around the unifying cultural and social symbols of the Kazak's nomadic pastoral past" (Sabol, 2003, p.151).⁶ Many national identity theorists believe that essential things such as self-definition and self-consciousness had developed late in respect to Kazakhstan. Yet it was undermined by the earlier Russian invasion in the 18th century that instilled in the Kazakh people a colonial consciousness that lasted for almost three centuries.

2.2.1 Kazakhstan under colonialism

Kazakhs led a nomadic way of life, and they had to migrate in order to keep cattle. They moved between *Kystau* - the wintering place in winter, and *Jailau* - the summer settlement to gain the benefits of differing climates in such a vast territory. Isaacs (2016) notes two negative effects of the forced settlement and sedentarisation of the Kazakh nomads into collective farms in the 1930s by Russia. Firstly, it led to an unspeakable tragedy, and millions died from famine

⁵ Civil war took place between different ethnic and social groups and state entities and followed the establishment of Bolshevik power as a result of the October Revolution in 1917.

⁶ Sabol (2003), Holm-Hansen (1999), Crowe (1998), and Kolstø (1999) used 'Kazak' and 'Kazakstan' transliteration rather than the Sovietised 'Kazakh' and 'Kazakhstan'.

and disease. Secondly, it also disconnected Kazakhs from their traditional ways of life and patterns of migration. In Holm-Hansen's (1999) view, Kazakhs were among the ethnic groups that suffered most in terms of demography during the Soviet period. The total number of Kazakhs decreased from 5.2 million in 1916 to 1.9 million in 1945. The facts about the famine were hidden and hushed up. During the Soviet era even the distribution of such facts was punishable by harsh criminal sentences, and the risk of execution. It took 43 years for Kazakhs to return to their 1926 population size (Norris, 2012).

As a result of Russia's aggressive policy, nomadic Kazakhs settled, and the land also then became available to other European homesteaders (Olcott, 1997). Svanberg (1996, pp.324-325) describes this process:

The Volga Germans, Balkars, Lezghins, Chechens, Ingushs, Finns, Karachais, Ossetians, Crimean Tatars, Moldavians, Bulgarians, Meskhetian Turks, Greeks, Kurds, and Koreans belong to the peoples deported to Kazakhstan before or in connection with the Second World War.

In total, 1.2 million people (Norris, 2012) found their home in Kazakhstan. As Olcott (1997) argues, Russia aimed to make the Kazakh nation a minority in its own territory. By contrast, Svanberg (1996) asserts that the deportations were probably to compensate for the decrease in the indigenous population in the early 1930s. The Soviets institutionalised multinationalism, which led to "a legal incongruence and a spatial mismatch between its two components - national territories and personal nationalities" (Brubaker, 1996, p.34). According to the 1989 census, more than 73 million Soviet citizens lived outside their national territory (Ibid). No matter what the real reasons for the deportation, this process had implications for the nation building of Kazakhstan, not to mention how it marginalised the Kazakh language and influenced the country's internal policy.

Norris (2012, p.382) takes another approach to the reasons for the deportations:

The empty space could be populated by other Soviet peoples, whether they were party enthusiasts or deported "special settlers". No wonder, then, that Kazakhstan also became the site of major Gulag camps. No wonder it became the centre of Khrushchev's Virgin Lands scheme. And no wonder it served as the space for Soviet nuclear tests and for sending Soviet rockets into space. The Kazakh lands proved to be the laboratory

for Soviet projects in population management, agricultural reform, and technological developments.

The colonial administration used Kazakhstan to achieve selfish goals. The country became a land for forced labour. The Gulag,⁷ Alzhir⁸ and Karlag⁹ camps were used for the family members of the victims of political repression, including children (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Alzhir museum depiction of the seizure of children. www.museum-alzhir.kz.

According to Kaukenov (2017), the whole country was turned into a kind of enormous prison in that period. According to other sources, the total number of convicts far exceeded 5.2 million. From the period 1921 to 1954, 100,000 people were convicted and 25,000 were sentenced to the death penalty - by execution. In 1928 mass arrests of former leaders of the *Alash Orda* government began. At the peak of the repression in 1937 in Kazakhstan, the number of prisoners reached 105,000, of which about 22,000 were sentenced to be shot (Kaukenov, 2017). It caused irreparable harm to the country's demographic and intellectual

⁷ The abbreviation derives from Russian ГУЛАГ, Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei (the headquarters of the camps).

⁸ The Akmola camp for the wives and children of 'traitors to the Motherland' was located 40km from the capital Nur-Sultan. It was the only camp in the USSR where up to 20,000 women were kept - the mothers, wives, and daughters of oppressed people (www.museum-alzhir.kz).

⁹ It was called Karlag because of its location in the Karagandy region. Karlag was a part of the Gulag system.

potential. The famine mentioned above, along with repressions and executions, led to “social amnesia”.¹⁰ What Smith (1996, p.383) describes, cynically perhaps, as necessary - “the importance of national amnesia and getting one’s own history *wrong* (is essential) for the maintenance of national solidarity” - clearly worked in Kazakhstan’s case.

The Soviet regime had a strict rule on nationalism: “nations were to be seen but not heard; culture [...] was to be national in form but socialist in content” (Brubaker, 1996, p.36). Being in a minority in their own land without a chance to fully self-express culturally led to animosity towards Soviet power. Ultimately, the wide gap between the government’s territorial framework and ethnic culture led to a massive mutiny.



Figure 4 The uprising in Almaty, 16-17 December, 1986. www.vlast.kz.

In December 1986 revolts erupted against the appointment of a Russian ruler, Gennadiy Kolbin, who had no connection with Kazakhstan, in the capital Almaty (see Figure 4). This, in Olcott’s (1997) view, led to the failure of Gorbachev’s government. Kazakh students and people, mainly aged between 16 and 40, went

¹⁰ R. Jacoby (1975) defined social amnesia as ‘memory driven out of mind’, as collective forgetting of the past.

to Central Square demanding a Kazakh leader be chosen to govern. Crowe (1998) argues that the rioting, which lasted for two days, became violent after 10,000 police with sharpened shovels attacked demonstrators. There are contradictory accounts of this event, with numbers of casualties uncertain: “anywhere from three to 58 Kazaks either died in the rioting or were executed afterwards” (Crowe, 1998, pp.407-408). The information about the exact number of arrests and deaths is opaque. It is argued (Ibid) that “Few of Kazakhstan’s current leaders can escape charges of some involvement in the government side of things”, hinting at official Kazakh involvement. That is why the data about this riot is still not available to the public. It can be argued that the riots awoke the national consciousness.

2.2.2 The collapse of the USSR

The systemic disintegration of the national economy, social structure and political sphere of the Soviet Union led, ultimately, to the dissolution of the USSR as a state in 1991. With its collapse, 15 former union republics gained independent statehood (Olcott, 2010). Brubaker (1996, p.23) describes this process:

The Soviet Union has collapsed, but the contradictory legacy of its unique accommodation to ethnonational heterogeneity lives on. [...] The Soviet state not only passively tolerated but actively institutionalized the existence of multiple nations and nationalities as fundamental constituents of the state and its citizenry. It established nationhood and nationality as fundamental social categories sharply distinct from the overarching categories of statehood and citizenship. In so doing, it prepared the way for its own demise.

There is no doubt that the Soviet norms of life and Soviet past influenced Kazakhstan. As a successor state, Kazakhstan’s leaders were proud of the demographic variables and multinationalism of that Soviet inheritance; it was an ideology close to them and they had every intention of continuing along the same path. That said, a country, which had lived in the Russian shadow (Akiner, 1995), witnessed a dramatic effect on its self-esteem after 1991. Not surprisingly, therefore, as Nazpary (2002) notes, the post-Soviet period in Kazakhstan was one of *bardak* (chaos) and an unstable state. The reason for that was the rapid accumulation of wealth in a few hands through immoral methods

such as privatisation, insecure loans, bribery and the emergence of a lawless society and violence.

2.2.3 Independence

After inheriting a dual legacy (territorial/political and ethnocultural/personal) (Brubaker, 1996), Kazakhstan became “a hybrid nation-state that has attempted to create a new sense of nationhood” (Norris, 2012, p.380) (see Figure 5). Having declared independence in December 1991, Kazakhstan had to map itself in the world and to choose a clear strategy for its nation-building process. Blum (2007) supports the idea that Kazakh identity has been constructed from a combination of Soviet and pre-Soviet sources such as Turkism, Tengriism (a pre-Islamic religion) and a historical background that has always reinforced the connection between East and West along the Silk Road. The result of all this, he argues strongly, is that the official Kazakhstani nation-building doctrine accepts the frontiers drawn up by the Soviet authorities as indissoluble.

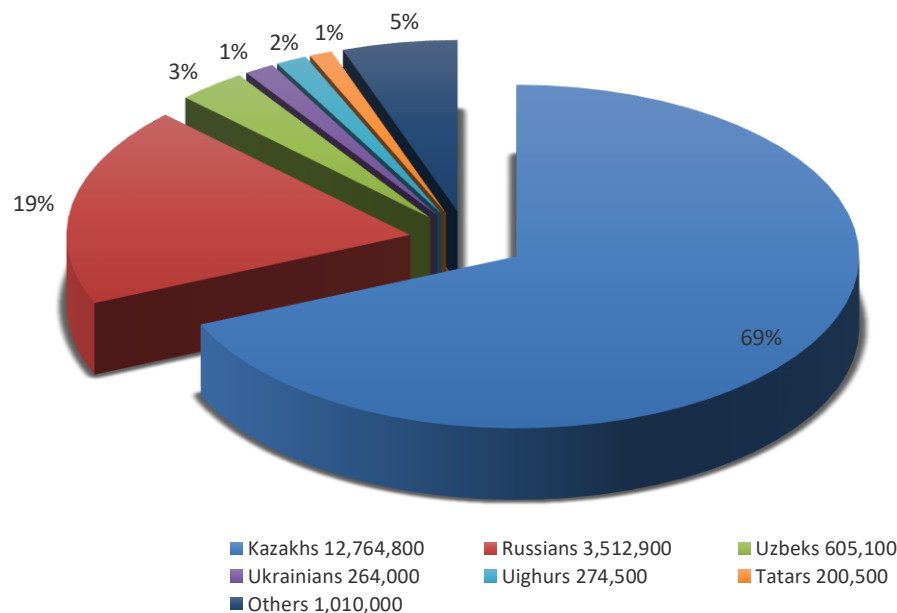


Figure 5 Ethnic composition of the population of Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2020.
www.stat.gov.kz.

One state decision in relation to their nation-building strategy was to invite ethnic Kazakhs from outside Kazakhstan back to their historical motherland.

Thus, since 1991, the government has sponsored a number of foreign Kazakhs, mainly from Mongolia, China, and Turkey, to return to Kazakhstan in order to fill this gap. In the past, Kazakhs who did not obey Soviet rules and did not give up their cattle to Russians crossed the border to China. From there, on foot and on horseback, they escaped from the Chinese communist regime and repression to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, then to Europe and the USA. More than half of them died during their long and difficult journey. Some of them stayed in those countries for several generations and live there still. About 5 million people identified as Kazakhs live abroad. Since 1992, about 900,000 *Oralman*, ethnic Kazakhs, have been repatriated (Laruelle, 2015). This policy was to increase the Kazakh population and distribute repatriates throughout the whole territory of Kazakhstan - in other words, to 'Kazakhify' the land. However, local people often consider the *Oralman* as 'other' (Oka, 2013) and treat them as Chinese and Mongols because they adopted the culture and language of the receiving countries in which they had settled. Moreover, local people tend to think that ethnic repatriates enjoy too many privileges, such as special allowances and benefits, while other ethnic minorities argue that Kazakhstan should not give privileges to *Oralman* at the expense of the local population (Ibid). Having come from different cultural and social environments, repatriates who do not speak Russian face difficulties in adapting to the new local culture. In cities, where the Russian language is still dominant, *Oralman* have little chance of being accepted as Kazakhs. Thus, this divergence between repatriates and local Kazakhs may further inhibit the formation of a common national identity within the already multinational society of Kazakhstan, which has enough problems already in unifying the diverse groups already there.

2.3 Kazakh identity

Historically, Kazakh cultural identity had long been actively suppressed to imitate a common Soviet identity (Stock, 2009). The question of Kazakh identity has resurfaced as a major issue since 1991. The question of whether Kazakhstan is to be multinational, an ethnic pairing of Kazakhs and Russians, or just a Kazakh native land continues to create problems within Kazakh politics (Olcott, 1997). In general, Kazakhstan has had to decide between a Turkic, civic, or Muslim society (Nazpary, 2002). Turkic-ness derived from the idea of Pan-

Turkism and implies being closer to and uniting all the Turkic-speaking nations, such as Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and others (Roy, 2000), reviving Turkic links. Pan-Turkism was popular among the members of the Alash movement at the beginning of the 20th century, who were oppressed but began to emerge again in the 1980s (Akiner, 1995). Civic society meant for Kazakhstan to develop more non-governmental organisations and public associations after the collapse of the USSR and to position itself as an open and democratic society. The third option is to declare itself as an Islamic country (given that 68 per cent of the population were Muslim) and to look toward the Islamic world. According to the last National Census of Kazakhstan in 2009, 27 per cent of people belonged to Christianity and 0.03 per cent practised Judaism (www.stat.gov.kz).

The sense of Kazakhness was weakened by two ideas. The first doctrine is *Kazakhstanness*, which seeks to combine all the ethnos in the country into one nation. This concept was not accepted by Kazakh intellectuals, who felt that it risked combining all 130 minorities into an American-style single nation. The second is the idea of Eurasianism, which sought to enable the peaceful coexistence of more than 130 ethnic groups and different religions. This idea first emerged in the 1920s and 1930s with Russian immigrants stating that Russian civilization was not European or Asian, but Eurasian. According to Laruelle (2015), both ideas of ‘Kazakhstanness’ and ‘Eurasianism’ promote an easy integration of domestic and foreign policies. However, Eurasianism is a broader concept: the political aim of this idea aims at integration of the post-Soviet countries into a kind of nostalgia for the past (Suslov, 2014). In this way Kazakhstan had developed the most sophisticated version of the post-Soviet “friendship of peoples” theory and turned it into an international brand (Laruelle, 2015, p.23). According to Abikeyeva (2006), by trying to instil the ideas of Eurasianism and Pan-Turkism, the West and the East fought for ideological influence: external powers tried to privilege one or the other of these ways of thinking for their own purposes. Nevertheless, the Kazakh identity, which struggled for purity, has been blurred in the wider concepts previously mentioned. It is obvious that Kazakhstan has been struggling to develop an identity through nation-building instruments. For Stock (2009, p.184) “this weak national identity impacted the nation image and the nation image

management”. Also, few Kazakhstani people accepted the concept of Eurasianism. However, it was understood by the rest as “evidence of a regime with an interest in ensuring interethnic peace” (Schatz, 2004b, p.130). Hence, the multi-ethnic dimension of Kazakhstan makes Kazakh identity vulnerable.



Figure 6 The Monument of Independence in Almaty. The Scythian Golden Man.
www.welovealmaty.com/monument-of-Independence.html.

Per contra to political and philosophical ideas just discussed, Kudaibergenova (2014) argues that much of the country’s architecture and national symbols characterise the ancient history of the Kazakh tribes. For instance, the Scythian Golden Man has become a symbol of independence since its appearance as a monument (Figure 6) in Almaty’s main square, making it part of Kazakhstan’s brand (Kudaibergenova, 2013). The Golden Man, a Scythian warrior buried in his or her (it could be a man or a woman) golden armour was discovered by archaeologists in 1969 near Almaty. It has been dated as approximately from the 4th-5th century BC. This highlights how historical symbols identifying Kazakh ethnicity may become branding symbols for the whole nation.

The political power in place has been seeking to instil Kazakhstani patriotism and to replace the population’s sense of belonging to the Soviet Union with Kazakhstani citizenship and identity. The former president of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, stressed that Kazakhstan would be neither eastern nor western, neither Islamic nor Christian; rather, the state should be a bridge between all of them (Olcott, 1997). This position is still taken by the Kazakh authorities and

often promoted in the mass media. Being a bridge between different cultures and being multicultural sends out mixed messages abroad as well as hindering the creation of a clear internal identity.

Starting from scratch, moving the capital from Almaty to Akmola (Akmola was renamed Astana in 1998 and became Nur-Sultan in 2019) for a number of political reasons, affected the consciousness of the Kazakh people. According to Schatz (2004b), relocation connected the country to Eurasianism. The position of Kazakhstan at the crossroads of cultures and the location of Astana at the centre of Kazakhstan intersected to ensure efficient logistics, communications, and security. The official rationale for transferring the capital from the south to the north was to avoid earthquakes and to distance the capital from political tension in neighbouring countries such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, according to Sadyk (2015), this and other issues were only used to divert the attention of other non-Kazakh minorities from the main reason: Astana was closer to the geographical locations of the ethnically Russian population of the country. According to one of the leading demographers of Kazakhstan, M. Tatimov, the main reason for the transfer of the capital was the need to shift the centre of demographic gravity from the southeast to the northwest (Sadyk, 2015). Schatz (2004b, p.124) argues that moving the capital “was intended to marginalize the rivals to Nursultan Nazarbayev, bolster his supporters, and simultaneously to gain access to important sources of international capital”. As Holm-Hansen (1999) argues, frequently moving the capital (four cities in one century) only goes to prove that Kazakhstan has an unsettled character as an ethno-political unit. It can be argued that this feature is also seen in the numerous amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), as well as various attempts to rename the capital, from Astana to Nur-Astana or Nursultan, in the name of President Nazarbayev, which was finally realised in 2019.

2.3.1 Kazakhstan, Kazakstan or Qazaqstan?

The name of the country (and its further projection through cinema), in any form of communication, is very important (Szondi, 2007). Today there are still endless debates about the correct spelling of the country’s name. Svanberg

(1996) argues that a correct spelling in English should be Kazak rather than Kazakh because, in 1991, the name of the country was transliterated from Russian. This is supported by Crowe (1998) who also uses the spelling Kazakhstan. Moreover, if Kazakhstan moves to the Latin alphabet by 2025, the country's name will be written as Qazaqstan.

When the country's name is used so often in English for communication purposes (Szondi, 2007), the Republic of Kazakhstan's name becomes problematic because of the fact that some members of the public consider this to be a significant mistake. The name Kazakhstan was formally adopted by the government, so the rest of the world accepted it. This meant that this "mistake" still exists in citizens' passports. Moreover, this issue makes it problematic not only for citizen's identity, but also for the actual internal and external transformation of Kazakhstan. This misconception contradicts Smith's (2001, p.7) argument: "a national symbolism is, of course, distinguished by its all-encompassing object, the nation, but equally by the tangibility and vividness of its characteristic signs. These start with a collective proper name". Thus, nation building without a clearly defined and accepted spelling of the country's name may reduce the chances of successfully creating an image.

2.4 Language

Kazakhs speak the Kazakh language which is a Turkic language belonging to the Kipchak branch (Svanberg, 1996). Language is still one of the most sensitive domestic policy issues in Kazakhstan. During both the Soviet period and under the Nazarbayev regime, Kazakhstan faced an enforced forgetting of Kazakh culture in favour of Russification (Burkhanov, 2017; Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan, 2013). By 1995, knowledge of the language had been destroyed and city-born Kazakhs knew only simple and standard phrases in Kazakh (Akiner, 1995). In 1993¹¹ the new constitution of Kazakhstan (ratified in 1995) confirmed the status of Kazakh and the status of "interethnic communication" through Russian (Konstitutsiya Respubliki Kazakhstan, 1995). The new law adopted on 11 July, 1997 (Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Yazykah, 1997) allowed the Russian

¹¹ In total there have been five amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan since its independence.

language to be used on an equal basis with the state Kazakh language's national and local self-government organisations. Burkhanov (2017) sees what lies ahead in respect of the next step in this two-generations' old choice. In his view, the older generation, including the ruling group, will give preference to Russian, while the younger generation will come to prefer their native language.

In the case of Kazakhstan, this issue is questionable. In just one century, Kazakhstan has faced three changes of script. In 1929 the country switched from Arabic to Latin. Twenty years later Latin was substituted by Cyrillic (Akiner, 1995). In 2025 Kazakhstan will return to the Latin script again. Currently, apart from having two official languages (Kazakh and Russian) the problem has been exacerbated by bringing the English language into a trilingual language policy in 2015. Adding a third language to the education process may be a threat to the role the Kazakh language currently has in a society with Russian language dominance.

2.5 Tribalism

In the past, the tribal structure of the Kazakhs was always based on the division of pasture land and annual migration routes, rather than cultural or economic diversity (Esenova, 1998). A tribal-type phenomenon is still relevant to modern Kazakh society. Kazakhs have three *Zhuz* (Hordes): Elder, Middle and Younger. Each of them consists of many tribes (clans). Every Kazakh family has to know its genealogical roots. Each family keeps its genealogical history - which is called *Shezhire* - at home (see Figure 7).

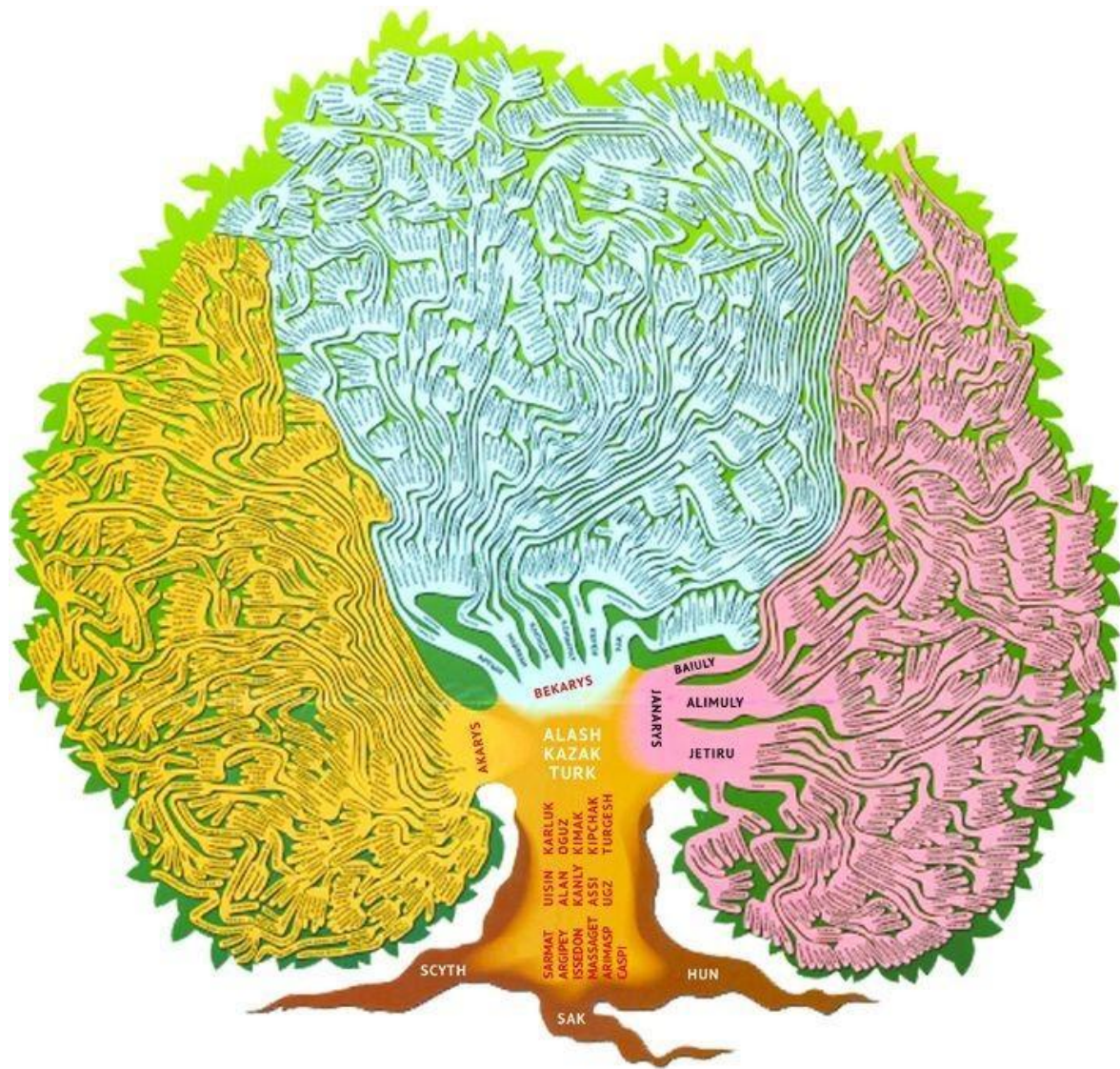


Figure 7 Kazakh clan division. Three *Zhuz*. www.azh.kz.

Kolstø (1999) notes that the *Zhuz* identity is ancient and more firmly established than the Kazakh identity. Such “inherently stronger loci of identity” (Sabol, 2003, p.152) were established to differentiate ethnic Kazakhs from other groups. Belonging to one of the three hordes is tied to a commonly accepted idea of genealogy (Kesici, 2011). Hence, Kazakhs made boundaries and distinguished an individual’s identity among themselves.

The priorities given to certain tribal groups have several negative effects. For example, according to Yilmaz (2014), Kazakh unification was impossible in the 19th century because of the division into the three *Zhuz*. Russia used this division of Kazakhs to divide and rule as it was an easy way to control them. Even today, the young generation are keen to know another person’s clan.

Members of the same clans and *Zhuz* usually feel a strong responsibility to support each other and promote their interests (Kesici, 2011) rather than supporting Kazakhs as a nation. One may argue that clan division can affect someone's career path and create disunity. For instance, between 1997 and 2001 the composition of elites in Kazakhstan's corridors of power consisted of 38.5 per cent Middle *Zhuz* rural-born Kazakhs, 38.1 per cent rural-born Elder *Zhuz*, and only 11.5 per cent rural-born Younger *Zhuz* (Schatz, 2004a, p.100). After the collapse of the USSR, the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, worked hard to privilege members of the Elder *Zhuz*, especially the Shapyrashty clan (which he belongs to). By doing so, he continued the practice of his predecessor, Dinmukhammed Qonayev, who also promoted this clan to high positions. Among successful appointments in the late 1990s was Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Minister of Foreign Affairs) (Schatz, 2005), who became the second president of Kazakhstan after Nazarbayev in 2019. Clan disunity and hidden struggles between them in the political arena slows down nation building.

Tribalism as a part of Kazakh history and the issues listed above are well documented in cinema, as we shall see.

2.6 Cinema

The history of Kazakh cinema is deeply interlinked with Soviet cinema. Kazakh film production first developed within the Soviet Union, thus forcibly impacting on Kazakh people's consciousness. Raudino (2015, p.113), analysing Baltic cinema, argues that Moscow's attempts "to cancel any culture other than the Russian in favour of the latter were unbearable, that is why any notion of Baltic cinema is incompatible with Soviet cinema". As a former Soviet state, one may argue that it might also be applicable to Kazakh cinema, which has also suffered from coexistence with Soviet rule. All of Kazakhstan's tragic history, and the Soviet policy of treating the titular nation as a minority in its land (Olcott, 1997), had led to a loss of national identity which has subsequently meant that Kazakh cinema has used films as a means of retrieval.

Significant steps in the history of Kazakh cinema date back to World War Two. In September 1941, the government institution - the Council of People's

Commissars of the USSR (Sovnarkom) - permitted the founding of a national film studio based in Alma-ata, where a newsreel studio had been operating since 1935. Later, Leningrad film studio (Lenfilm), Mosfilm and the Central newsreel studio had to be evacuated temporarily and relocated to Kazakhstan due to World War Two. These three studios were amalgamated in November 1941 into TSOKS, the Central United Film Studio (Nogerbek, 2013). In its train, this studio produced more than 80 per cent of all Soviet wartime feature films. At this point in 1944 the Alma-ata film studio was renamed as the Alma-ata Film Studio of Feature Films and Chronicles. It was to take until 1960 for it finally to be called Kazakhfilm studio (Kazakhfilm, 2018). In 1984 the studio was named after Shaken Aimanov, who was an outstanding director in Kazakh cinema. It can be suggested that the relocation of the Russian studios triggered a film boom in Almaty that benefited from the vast experience of Soviet cinema production. However, all of the films made had to be politically steered towards spreading the spirit of communism (Nogerbek, 2013), acting as ideological instruments to shape the ideal image of the Soviet citizen. Hence, Kazakh cinematography played an invaluable role in cinematic nation building in Kazakhstan. However, given the Soviet bias, some scholars argued (for instance, Jarvie, 2000) that such films were not sufficient for nation building and could only contribute to it. On the other hand, the coexistence with Soviet cinema spawned the birth and development of domestic cinema. Isaacs (2016, p.139) suggests that in the post-Stalin era, film was used as an instrument to establish historical and cultural markers of Kazakh national identity through the reinterpretation and visualisation of myth, folklore, and historic heroes. He argues:

The government's aim has been to use film as means to provide an "official" interpretation of Kazakh nationhood; drawing particular attention to both Kazakhstan's nomadic and warrior past and the multi-ethnic civic dimension of its nationhood; a consequence of the forced Stalinist deportations of different ethnicities to the territory of Kazakhstan in the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time, other voices have emerged in contemporary Kazakh cinema which offer alternative conceptualisations of Kazakh nationhood, identity, and nation-formation. These are principally based on religious and socio-economic interpretations of Kazakh nationhood.

This is probably one of the critical interpretations of Kazakh cinema under Soviet rule. Hence, film served to interpret Kazakh nationhood and identity. The state encouraged the Kazakh people to imagine statehood through film as it was

represented and controlled from the “top”. State propaganda was, therefore, highly effective and the most powerful means of forming a national ideology through cinema.

2.6.1 Different approaches to the development of Kazakh cinema

This thesis will follow the chronological and thematic approach to classification established by Abikeyeva (2013) and Isaacs (2018) as it fits well with the needs of this study, defining the various phases of cinematic nation building in Kazakhstan.

Let us now look more closely at the categorisation touched on briefly at the start of this section. Abikeyeva (2013) groups the history of Kazakh cinema in the following way: ¹²

1) 1964-1972, the period of *the Thaw*.

This was the period soon after the death of Stalin when Khrushchev acknowledged some of Stalin’s crimes and the initiation of a more relaxed political period, hence the term “thaw”. Cinema then served as propaganda and the instrument of ideology;

2) The era of *Perestroika*, 1988-1991. A political movement for reform within the Communist Party of the USSR. *Perestroika* led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union;

3) The first years of independence, 1992-1997;

4) Nation building, 1998-2005. This last, she argues, is the beginning of the creation of a national idea.¹³

The era of *Perestroika*, 1988-1991

The need for a national dimension in Kazakh cinema had been felt since Soviet times. Heroes of films became symbolic during *Perestroika* in Kazakhstan. The influence of the Kazakh New Wave on Kazakhstan’s cinema is considerable (Beumers, 2010). As stated (Ibid), in 1983 the Russian film director Sergei Solov’ev of the famous Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) selected

¹² There are also chronological classifications by B. Nogerbek (2013) and Mowell (2014).

¹³ The period 1972-1988 is missing in Abikeyeva’s classification (2013, pp.163-174).

Kazakh students for his course, including Rashid Nugmanov, Darezhan Omirbayev, Serik Aprymov, Ardak Amirkulov, Abai Karpykov, and Amir Karakulov, who are all now famous Kazakh directors. This group graduated in 1988 and started reshaping the Kazakh film industry. In 1989 at the International Film Festival in Moscow, Kazakh cinema was called “New Wave”. Young filmmakers had an opportunity to bring some freedom into their work and using the Kazakh language was a real novelty (Pruner, 1992). Before independence all Kazakh films were produced in the Russian language first, and then dubbed into Kazakh. The Kazakh New Wave opened up Central Asian cinema to the world (Abikeyeva, 2006) through films such as Rashid Nugmanov’s *The Needle* (1988), which symbolised the death of the previous age (Abikeyeva, 2013).¹⁴



Figure 8 Director Rashid Nugmanov (left) and Viktor Tsoi on the set of the film *The Needle* (1989). <https://dubikvit.livejournal.com/216666.html>.

In the film (see Figure 8), which captures the era, the famous singer of the band Kino, Victor Tsoi, who is an ethnic Korean, took on the role of Moro, a character

¹⁴ Films with a similar impact include: Abay Karpykov’s *The Little Fish in Love* (1989), Amir Karakulov’s *A Woman Between Two Brothers* (1991), Serik Aprymov’s *The Last Stop* (1989), Darezhan Omirbayev’s *Kairat* (1991).

struggling with drug dealers in Almaty. In Birgit Beumer's (2013) opinion, this was the first Soviet film to address the drug problem openly. Moro returns to Alma-ata where he visits his former girlfriend, drug addict Dina. Moro tries to treat her by taking her to the deserts of the Aral Sea.¹⁵ When Moro reveals a drug dealer's identity, he is killed. Across the USSR more than nine million people viewed the movie in its first three months (Pruner, 1992).

The Needle is described by Chernetsky (2003, p.151) as a film that "offers arguably the most thoroughgoing and radical appropriation of post-modernist aesthetics in the cinema of the final years of the Soviet Union's existence". The hero Moro's words "We want change!", which references his song *Hochu peremen (I Want Change)*, somehow reflected the will of the society to change the system (Abikeyeva, 2013). Coincidence or not, the Soviet Union disintegrated three years after the film's release. The drug addict Dina can be considered as a metaphor for Soviet society, which enters "heroin withdrawal" in its transition period (Abikeyeva, 2006, p.114). Hence, the Kazakh movie mirrored the social and political life in the almost-collapsed USSR.

The first years of independence, 1992-1997

The old system's collapse, and uncertain future, affected filmmaking,¹⁶ including in *Allazhar* (1993). This social drama by Kaldybai Abenov reflects the uprising in 1986 against the appointment by Moscow of the new ruler, Kolbin (see Figures 4, 9 and section 2.2.1). The film was banned for many years as it contains politically sensitive scenes that might incite ethnic hatred. The character of the young student Azat is a portrait of Kairat Ryskulbekov, a real victim of 1986, acted by the famous contemporary film director Akan Satayev. Azat is advised by his uncle, a university staff member, to protest against the Moscow appointment. He joins other students and goes to the square. On radio channels, this event is reported as drug addicts staging a riot. Azat, trying to escape from the police, goes to his uncle's house, but he is not eager to let him in. Azat, now labelled a murderer, is caught by the police, tortured, and wrongfully

¹⁵ The Aral Sea is located in Kyzylorda region and connects Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (see Figure 1).

¹⁶ *Surzhekey, the Angel of Death* (1991), *Ravenous* (1991), *Lovers of December* (1991), *Allazhar* (1993), *Death of Otyrar* (1991), *Youth of Abai* (1995), *Zhambyl* (1996), *Cardiogram* (1995), *Shanghai* (1996), and *Killer* (1998).

imprisoned. Under mysterious circumstances, Azat is then killed in a Russian prison.



Figure 9 Still from *Allazhar*: Akan Satayev in the role of Azat. <https://voxpathuli.kz/527-tsena-nezavisimosti/>.

Nation building: 1998-2005

This era began with the formation of a national idea (Abikeyeva, 2006). Creative intellectuals, including filmmakers, became the agents of the nation-building process. The films of this era¹⁷ were all examples of this. For instance, life's difficulties after the collapse of the Soviet Union were described in Gulshat Omarova's¹⁸ *Schizo* (2004) (see Figure 10). With no work, or means to make a living, people had to get by as best as they could. Disabled Mustafa's nickname, Schizo, is short for schizophrenic. He has no father, but he idolises his mother's boyfriend, Sakura, who exploits this by using him as a helper at illegal fights for betting purposes so he can profit from gambling. Although happy-go-lucky, initially Schizo is drawn to the money and lifestyle. However, on witnessing how Sakura's fellow fight bosses carelessly get rid of a dead man after a fight, he is quickly disillusioned and is not prepared to tolerate such inhumanity and

¹⁷ *Aksuat* (1998), *Zamanai* (1998), *Leila's prayer* (2002), *Don't cry!* (2002), *Schizo* (2004), *The Hunter* (2004), *Renaissance Island* (2004), *Steppe Express* (2005), *Notes of a Railwayman* (2006).

¹⁸ A woman director acted in *Suyirik* (1984) in the main role.

indifference. Schizo ends up killing Sakura and is imprisoned. Thus, we have another film emphasising the vulnerability of those on the bottom rung of society.



Figure 10 Still from *Schizo* (2004) by Gulshat Omarova. www.film.ru/photo/frames/shiza.

The new era: 2005-2020

I argue that this period of 15 years is one marked by many ups and downs and can be regarded as the new millennium of Kazakh cinema. Between 2005 and 2019 the state-owned Kazakhfilm studio was the sole producer of all 98 feature films made during this time (www.kazakhfilmstudios.kz).

An example is one of Akan Satayev's most touching pictures, *The Road to Mother* (2016), based on real events (www.theroadtomother.com). This story takes us through all that Kazakhstan suffered through the 20th century: collectivisation and mass emigration, famine, World War Two, and the post-war period. The main hero, Ilyas, endures an endless series of tragic experiences: an orphanage, wartime deprivation and the Gulag. Yet, despite all this, he never loses hope of returning to his mother.

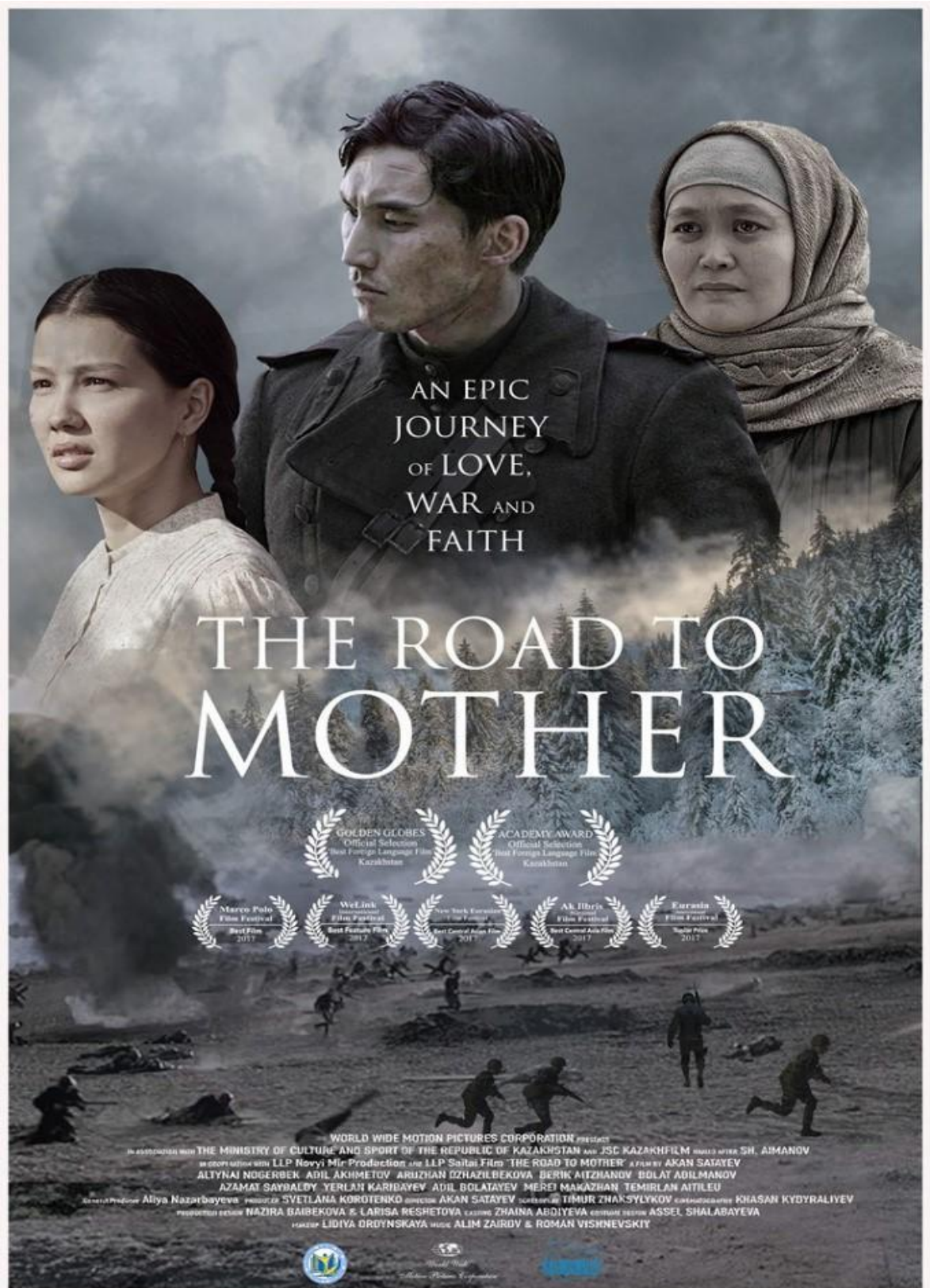


Figure 11 The poster of *The Road to Mother* (2016) in the USA by World Wide Motion Pictures Corporation. <https://liter.kz/1883-film-doroga-k-materi-pokagut-v-ssha/>.

Kazakhstan had previously nominated the picture for the Academy Award and Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film. International circulation of the film seemed promising when World Wide Motion Pictures Corporation acquired North

American distribution rights for the film (see Figure 11) and announced its theatrical release in May 2019 in selected cinema theatres (WWMPC, 2019b) as well as its non-theatrical release in September 2019. WWMPC's sub-distributors include Kino Lorber for DVD, video on demand, streaming, pay TV, free TV and new digital media, and Swank Motion Pictures (WWMPC, 2019a). *The Road to Mother* can be classified as a historical film, but with no nomadic or warrior element. This has become a distinct classification within the thematic approach to Kazakh cinema.

2.6.2 Thematic approach

Mette Hjort (2000, p.107) argues, with respect to Danish cinema:

The theme of nation almost presents itself as a theme of *this* particular nation, and, as such, it provides a paradigmatic example of a topical theme and is inextricably linked to specific, explicitly acknowledged identities.

In other words, when films flag a particular theme, this thematises the nation and makes it distinct. In this regard, four main themes proposed by Isaacs (2012) distinguish Kazakh cinema: nomadic/warrior; films with a multi-ethnic dimension; religious films based on Tengriism; socio-economic films. According to Isaacs (2018), each of these classifications has reminded Kazakh people who they are, and, in this way, films became a bridge of identity between the government and the nation.

These themes tend to have their own specific agendas. Films with a multi-ethnic dimension describe multinational diversity and its historical background in Kazakhstan, e.g., *The Gift to Stalin* (2008) and *Promised Land* (2011). The first film describes the painful fate of the little Jewish boy Sasha (Kazakh name Sabyr), who is saved from death in 1949 by his Kazakh grandfather, Kassym, just at the onset of a new wave of repression, executions, and deportations. Israeli writer David Markish, whose memories formed the basis of the film, acted as the elderly Sasha. The second film describes the deportation of other ethnic groups, in particular, Koreans, to Kazakhstan in the early 1930s. Also, the movie portrayed the legendary Kazakh hospitality. This theme of the nation, according to Hjort (2000), may be analysed via an intercultural approach. She (Ibid, p.111)

asserts that the approach is effective for a “contrastive mobilization of *different* national cultures” and draws the attention of the audience towards the issue of national identity. Kazakh movies with multi-ethnic themes have helped build the idea of ‘Kazakhstanness’ described in section 2.3. The various religious films tend to be based on Tengriism,¹⁹ the pre-Islamic religion of the Kazakh nation that helped form its identity. Finally, socio-economic films, the trump card of the talented director Akan Satayev,²⁰ tend to have a criminal connotation, the purpose of which is to highlight the lengths ordinary Kazakh people had to go to to survive after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nomadic/warrior films.

In 2005 JSC Kazakhfilm released *Nomad* for an exorbitant budget close to \$40 million. Thus, although Kazakh historical movies narrate the rich history of the Kazakh nation, they can shape national identity and consciousness today. As Norris (2012, p.386) puts it: “*Nomad* is more about using the past for present-day purposes”, calling all tribes of Kazakhstan to unite. One may argue that the glorification of “the nomadic lifestyle of Kazakh ancestors” led to its repackaging within new traditions (Waśkeil, 2019, p.59). The nomadic/warrior theme of Kazakh films underpins this “reconnecting with national roots or re-imagining national identities” (Hjort, 2000, p.115). Kazakhs may reimagine their past through historical nomadic dramas. If ethnic history is the most powerful tool to protect the nation (Smith, 1995) then historical films emphasise the greatness of the nation (Smith, 2000).

Nomadic or warrior films like *Nomad* (2005) (see Figure 16) or *Warriors of the Steppe* (2012) (see Figure 12) aimed to instil pride in Kazakh heroism throughout the centuries by recreating epic battles against Jungars (Laruelle, 2015).²¹ Some scholars (Yessenova, 2011) argued that *Nomad* served as an attempt to establish a new national brand for Kazakhstan, aiming at a global audience. However, it failed to do so, earning only \$3 million worldwide and \$79,000 at the US box

¹⁹ *Bakasy* (2008) by Gulshat Omarova and *The Old Man* (2012) by Yermek Tursunov.

²⁰ He produced such films as *Districts* (2016), two series of *Racketeer* (2007 and 2015) and *Businessmen* (2018).

²¹ It was the population of the Jungar Khanate founded in the 17th century by the unification of Oirat tribes at the junction of the territories of modern Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia.

office after limited release (Norris, 2012). The Kazakh audience sharply criticised both the role of the Kazakh state in promoting the film and the fact that filmmakers were adopting Hollywood techniques at the expense of indigenous identity and culture. The film was packaged as a Western blockbuster with three American actors Jay Hernandez, Kuno Becker and Mark Dacascos in the leading roles, rather than Kazakh actors thus, it was argued, diluting Kazakh identity.

The director Akan Sataev's blockbuster, *Myn Bala: Warriors of the Steppe* (2012), depicts the story of young teenagers who are nomadic warriors. They are led by a boy named Sartay, who helped defeat the Jungars in 1729. After uniting the young warriors and fighting with Jungars, Sartay dies. This film portrays youngsters who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the Motherland.

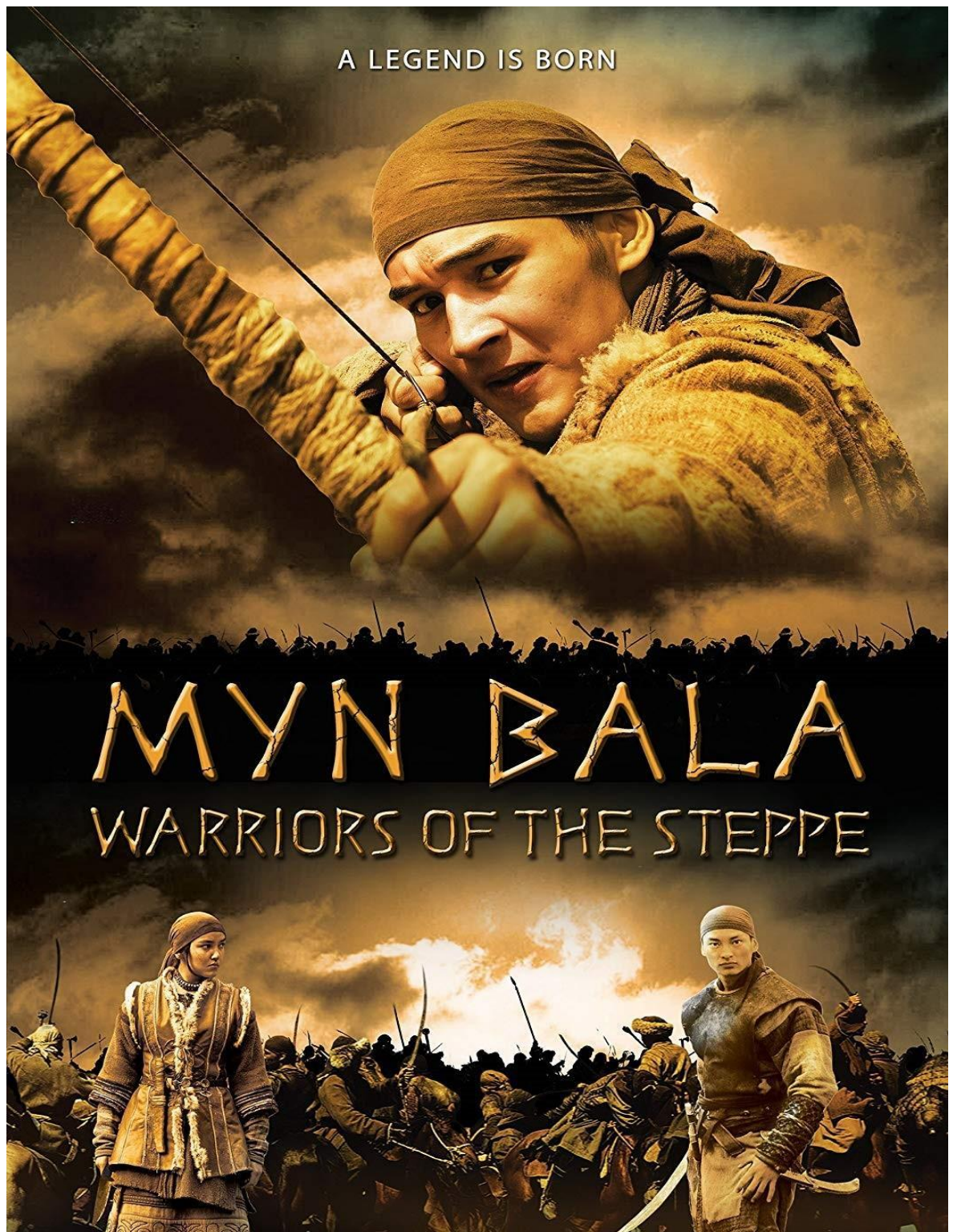


Figure 12 A DVD cover of *Myn Bala: Warriors of the Steppe* on Amazon.
www.amazon.com/Myn-Bala-Warriors-Asylkhan-Tolepov/dp/B00EX465U8.

The historical epic beat all records in the domestic market, earning more than \$1 million in its first weekend (Holdsworth, 2012) and ranked second only to *Avatar* in the domestic box office (Dalton, 2012). The historical film screened at the Cannes Film Festival on 17 May, 2012, and was picked up consequently by an international distribution agent, Toronto's 108 Media, for world sale

(Holdsworth, 2012). The same year, it won a special prize at the 31st Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran, Iran (www.kazakhfilmstudios.kz). Reviewed by *Hollywood Reporter* as a “Central Asian hybrid of *Braveheart*” (Dalton, 2012, n.p.), it was Kazakhstan’s official entry at the Oscars in 2013 in the Best Foreign language section. The chairman of the Canadian distribution company indicated that the video and DVD rights to the film had been sold to the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Middle Eastern countries (*Oca Magazine*, 2012) with a dubbed translation and became available in North America for video on demand (Usmanova, 2013). Compared to the previous release, *Nomad, Myn Bala: Warriors of the Steppe* was far more successful, with more of a Kazakh feel that reflected Kazakh identity.



Figure 13 Still from *Tomiris* (2019). The actress Almira Tursyn in a costume of the Saks (Scythian) tribes. www.informburo.kz.

The next film, *Tomiris* (2019), is about the events of the sixth century BC, when the Saks tribes, led by Queen of Massageteans, Tomiris, defeated the Persian king Cyrus II (Kazpravda, 2017). The main hero, Princess Tomiris, is wearing the Saks costume (see Figure 13), symbolising a Kazakhstan “brand” - the Golden Man (see Figure 6). Thus, the film reflects a distinctly Kazakh portrayal of the nation imagined through its nomadic past. *Tomiris* thus provides Kazakhs with a permanent, specifically historical Kazakh vision of themselves. This, in spite of the fact that Iranians criticised the historical facts of the film on the director’s

Instagram page (@akansatayev) before its release.²² Having spent ₸2.5 billion (£5,108,750) of Kazakhfilm's money, the film grossed ₸480 million (nearly £980,500) in local markets in only one month and the number of daily theatrical screenings in the country increased to 800 (Smaiyl, 2019). Moreover, after its release, Tomiris became a particularly popular name for new-borns (Auezov, 2019), further signifying the important role of the film in the nation's consciousness.

Subsequent films in the genre are *The Kazakh Khanate: The Diamond Sword* (2016) and *The Kazakh Khanate: The Golden Throne* (2019), two parts of an epic based on the novel trilogy by Ilyas Esenberlin, *The Nomads* (1976); there was also a 10-episode television version of the two films. The first film portrayed the birth of the Kazakh Khanate in the 15th century that was to result in the merger of the Kazakh *Zhuz* with the first Khans, Kerey and Zhanibek (see Figures 2 and 14). In the sequel, the two Khans call on the nomadic tribes to leave the cruel ruler, Abilkhair Shaibani, by migrating from Desht-i-Kipchak to Mogolistan in Zhetisu,²³ so that the two khans could build the Kazakh Khanate.

²² Iranians believe that Tomiris has nothing to do with ancient Turkic tribes and she had Persian roots. The film is based on the historical account by Herodotus, while Iranians support the versions of Beros and Xenophon, which revealed that Cyrus was not beheaded by Tomiris.

²³ South-Eastern part of Kazakhstan.



Figure 14 The poster of *Kazakh Khanate: The Golden Throne* (2019) by Rustem Abdirashev. www.imdb.com.

The producer of the series *The Kazakh Khanate*, Arman Arsenov, admitted that idea for a film in the style of *Game of Thrones* came after the words of Russian president Vladimir Putin: “Kazakhs have never had statehood. He [Nursultan Nazarbayev] created it” (Osharov, 2014, n.p.). Putin declared this at the Seliger Youth Forum in 2014. Some political scientists say that Putin, with sarcasm, just repeated the words of the former president of Kazakhstan from 2011: “There has never been a ... Kazakh state, because it had no borders. Having marked the borders of the Kazakh state for the first time, we brought it to the United Nations. ... Never have the Kazakhs voluntarily built their capital” (Mamashuly, 2014, n.p.). Both comments caused discontent and violent indignation among the Kazakh people. However, to counter this, Kazakhstanian officials announced the celebration of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate. *The Guardian* described it as: “an exercise in nation building for Kazakhstan” (Lillis, 2016, n.p.). Putin’s comments thus pressurised Kazakhstan into celebrating a date that had never been acknowledged before. But then Kazakhstan has not been behind in investing in anything that will promote the Kazakh brand. Every year millions are spent on celebrating the new capital’s birthday, not to mention this

investment in a major historical film. And the backing for Kazakhstan's historical films has, without doubt, came mainly in response to the mockumentary *Borat* by Sacha Baron Cohen.

2.6.3 Borat's help

Kazakhstani officials quickly grasped the lack of a national image after Sacha Baron Cohen's 2006 film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (20th Century Fox) (see Figure 15). The film became, in Saunders' (2007, p.226) words, an "unbearable cancer on the visage of the new Kazakhstan".²⁴

Indeed, Borat used to be so familiar to people's consciousness that just the mention of Kazakhstan triggered immediate an association with this fictitious character. As Carpenter (2007, p.19) puts it, both for people who are aware that the hero is fictitious and for people who do not know about Kazakhstan, "this film's depiction will automatically be the first bit of 'knowledge' about the country". The mockumentary has earned nearly \$262 million worldwide by portraying the country as a former Soviet backwater (Savodnik, 2011). For a country unknown to the rest of the world such as Kazakhstan, there was no option but to use soft power (Anholt, 2005) for the first time. The Kazakh Ministry for Foreign Affairs official, Yerzhan Ashykbayev, threatened legal action and declared that Cohen "is serving someone's political order designed to present Kazakhstan and its people in a derogatory way" (Saunders, 2007, p.226). This position of the Kazakh officials shows that the country is autocratic and does not tolerate any criticism. Their attempts to counter Cohen attracted even more attention to the mockumentary.

²⁴ Robert Saunders is a scholar of Borat and calls himself a Boratologist (www.boratologist.com).



Figure 15 Still from *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). www.hollywood.com.

The conflict between Baron Cohen's TV journalist character and Kazakhstan started earlier in 2000 when Borat first appeared on the *Ali G Show* on the British public service TV station, Channel 4 (Stock, 2009). After that, Kazakhstan placed a four-page commercial article in *The New York Times* "Kazakhstan in the 21st century", publishing evidence of oil production, the power of women and the education system in the country (2005), as well as a couple of commercial videos on CNN and the local ABC affiliate in Washington, D.C. (Fletcher, 2006). This act was defined by Saunders (2008, p.69) as "the battle for control of Kazakhstan's national image".

The immediate reaction in the country after the Borat character appeared as a host on the MTV Awards showed that Kazakhstan believed that Western audiences actually saw the nation as whole in the way it was shown in the film (Stock, 2009).

Kazakhstan feared to be "imagined" as the Kazakhstan portrayed by Borat. [...] Therefore, Kazakhstan suffers from a certain lack of "national confidence", leading to its external perception. The mentioned lack of

confidence is combined with a considerable lack of humour with regard to the post-modern irony of *Borat*. (Stock, 2009, p.184)

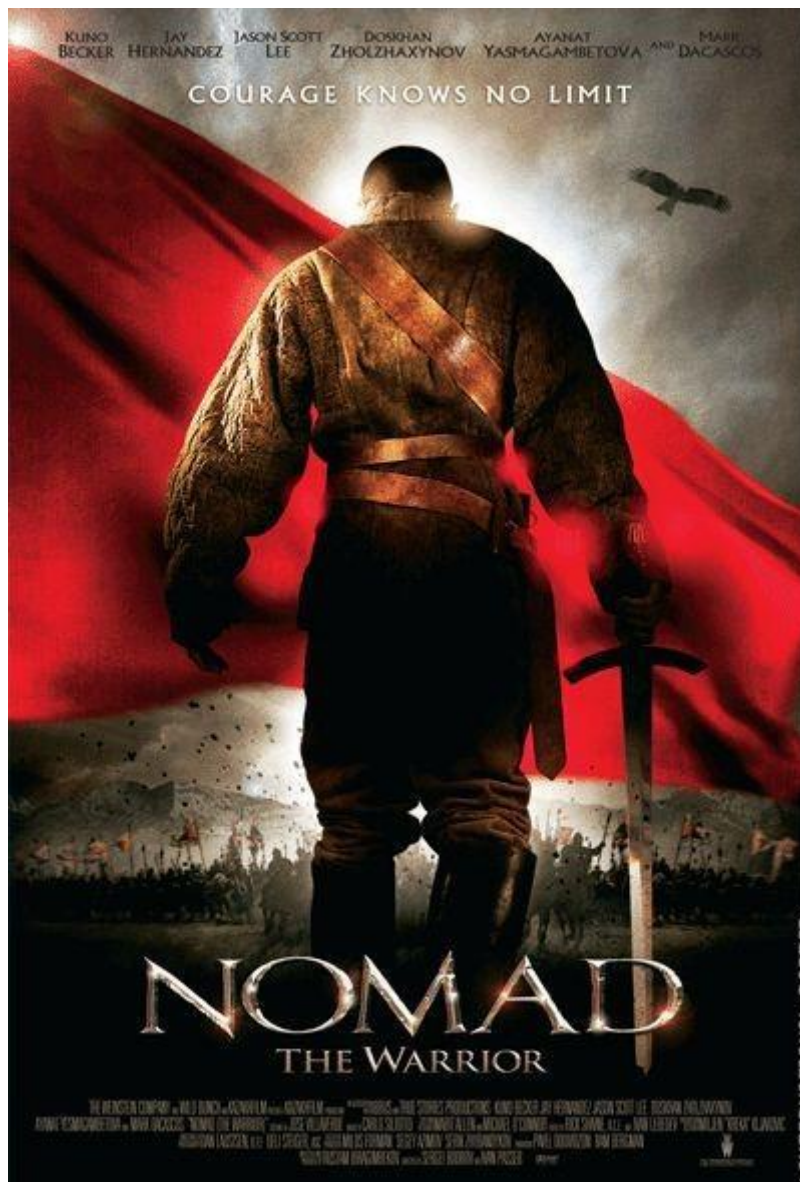


Figure 16 The poster of *Nomad: the Warrior* (2006) by Wild Bunch distribution company. <https://www.wildbunch.biz/movie/nomad/>.

Interestingly, the launching of *Nomad* in 2006 worldwide by the Kazakh government was an attempt to “hit back with a movie about its glorious past, fighting off the Mongol invaders” (Porter, 2006, n.p.). Although Kazakhstan became “the most high-profile victim” (Dinnie, 2016, p.114) and its national brand was “hijacked” (Saunders, 2007, p.240) by a mockumentary character, “the most expressive reaction to the film *Borat* was the development of Kazakh cinema” (Waśkiel, 2019, p.56). Therefore, *Borat* pushed the government to create the first movie for wide international circulation. Also, the Kazakh

director, Yerkin Rakyshev, produced a film *Borat, My Brother* (2013) as a response to the original movie.

However, some film critics argued that *Borat* reduced the chances of *Nomad*'s chances, given its release was delayed, thus also delaying the more positive introduction of Kazakhstan to the world (Norris, 2012). It is claimed that if *Nomad* had been released on time, before *Borat*, the image crisis would have bypassed Kazakhstan, but this argument is difficult to prove. As can be seen from the poster (see Figure 16), if first impressions count, the red flag and the actor's back do not truly demonstrate the real Kazakh identity and the history of the 18th century. Is it a red flag of the October Revolution, or is it a soldier of World War Two?

Consequently, Borat helped to attract visitors and a boom in film-induced tourism. For instance, the November 2006 issue of the *Kazakhstan News Bulletin* by the Embassy of Kazakhstan in the United States published the launch of two Borat-themed holiday itineraries: "Kazakhstan vs. Boratistan" and "Jagzhemash!!! See the real Kazakhstan" (Saunders, 2008, p.78). Also, www.hotels.com reported in 2006 that Internet searches for accommodation in Kazakhstan had jumped 300 per cent just after *Borat*'s release (Mangan, 2006). Moreover, international arrivals increased from 3,468,000 in 2006 to 3,876,000 in 2007 (Pratt, 2015, p.985). Furthermore, after the subsequent film, *Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, was released in October 2020, the Kazakh government reacted by turning the character's catchphrase "Very nice!" into a new tourism campaign (Sullivan, 2020). In this way Kazakh officials invited tourists to see "Borat's homeland". Therefore, although the film created a rather unusual, negative image of the country, it still encouraged people to visit it.

Conclusion

Cinema is a constructor of national identity and can strongly impact on nation building. Nationalism, in turn, as a communicative space connects nationhood and cinema. The latter is a constructor of a national "self". Self-definition of

the nation may be possible when the nation distinguishes itself from others. The paradigm of otherness helps to define national cinema. Also, state policy, including defending national films against Hollywood hegemony and the historical dimension of films, helps to qualify the films as national.

The identity question is very pertinent for Kazakhstan: positioning itself as neither Eastern nor Western, but as Eurasian multi-ethnic country, has involved a difficult journey. On the one hand, Kazakh people see themselves as descendants of the Turks; on the other, they embrace their nomadic legacy reflected in literature and culture. Furthermore, the traditions and culture of the nomads that shaped the roots of the Kazakh national identity are inexplicably woven into the Soviet era. The language issue has divided the country into two polar worlds: the Kazakh and Russian. The Russianness of modern Kazakh society and the bilingualism of the Kazakh linguistic landscape makes self-identification problematic and nation building uncertain, leaving the national image undefined.

It is undeniable that Kazakh cinema has lain in the shadows of the more transnational Soviet cinema. After independence, Kazakhstan as a nation won a chance to be branded for the international audience through films, transforming from “Sovietness” to the state that it is today.

The development of Kazakh cinema has now changed significantly from a controlling centralised body - the State Committee for Cinematography in Moscow - in Soviet times, to one that includes producer-led productions as well as independent films. However, the post-Soviet collapse in the film industry meant it could not immediately adapt to harsh market demands. This is why, up until now, Kazakh cinema has focused mainly on historical dramas.

There is an urgent need to examine the contemporary issues for Kazakh cinema and film policy in the present transition phase with the implications that it has for nation building. This thesis aims to fill in the research gaps outlined in the previous chapters by way both of empirical analysis and qualitative approach. The next chapter will be concerned with justifying and narrating these processes.

3 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines how this project was established and then responds to the limitations it faced, as well as reviewing the methods used. It begins with the project's history and the timeline. From there, it moves on to the methodology and research methods. It shows how these are used to account for problems and gaps in Kazakh cinema industry as well as the role of EurIFF in the nation building of Kazakhstan. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the research design, explaining how I carried out field trips and data collection, which includes semi-structured interviews with key individuals in the Kazakh film industry. I also point to general obstacles, challenges, ethical considerations, and limitations in conducting this research.

3.1 Qualitative methodology

Nation building and cinema are complex notions. As such, this research, like any other study, needed to have an appropriate research design.

When choosing among three methods, it is crucial to understand the nature of each of them. For example, a quantitative method (a survey, for instance) provides a “quantitative description of trends” (Creswell J.W. and Creswell, 2018, p.147). It aims to test a hypothesis that has been previously formulated (Flick, 2015). As became more evident throughout the project, the study of Kazakh cinema mainly has a descriptive character. Hence, the cinema's effect on nation building needs to be explored empirically by using qualitative methodologies. This thesis does not use quantitative methodologies as the data could not be analysed by running computer programs and could not be expressed by statistics only, although quantitative strategies are regarded by many as more scholarly. Moreover, my data referred to the meanings, characteristics, and description of things (Berg, 2004) as well as a complex and detailed understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2013). Besides, statistical analysis does not fit the research issue (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In addition, I was more concerned with people's behaviour and life stories, which are more readily conveyed via a qualitative methodology (Silverman, 2017). However, as argued

by Bryman (2016), qualitative research is often criticised for being unstructured and lacking transparency (e.g., the way people are chosen for interviews or observation). I tried to overcome this by providing to my supervisors a list of potential interviewees (amended and updated several times), along with resumés of their role in relation to Kazakh cinema.

As Patton (2002) discusses, there are three key types of qualitative data: 1) in-depth and open-ended interviews; 2) direct observation; and 3) written documents. The qualitative methods that I used in this thesis consisted of semi-structured interviews and observation to implement the research design. Desk research occupied an extensive period of this study. Academic papers, film policy documents (Cinema Law, Language Law, all legal documents concerned with the establishment of the State Centre for Support of National Cinema and the Expert Council), government documents (regulations, charters), mass media observation and the history of Kazakh cinema were thoroughly analysed. It should be noted that as the project was ongoing, the desk research continued throughout the PhD's whole journey. Also, I used a research diary in the fieldwork (Scott and Garner, 2013) as a part of my research activity.

With respect to the design of the qualitative research, many studies follow a traditional model based on the following: Idea - Theory - Design - Data collection - Analysis - Findings. I largely followed the “research-before-theory model” set out by Berg (2004, p.19), where data collection and analysis come before theoretical framing. That said, the research was guided by some general considerations, including familiarity with relevant theories, hand in hand with the field research and the analysis of findings.

3.2 Project history and the timeline

The genesis of this project dates back to 2006 when I attended a session at the School of Young Democracy and Leadership in Berlin, funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. During this trip, I had an opportunity to watch the newly released film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* by Sacha Baron Cohen. After the film, I gave an interview as a Kazakhstani citizen to one of the local TV channels about my impressions,

which were twofold: at that point in my life I simply did not understand the humour or, indeed, the point of the film. Added to this, I could not understand why the creator of the picture had chosen Kazakhstan for this purpose and I was concerned about its effect on Kazakhstan's image. I had no idea then that *Borat* would become a section of my future dissertation project. Although I was always an active fan of Kazakh films, I had never imagined that our films were so diverse, or Kazakh directors so talented, until I started this project.

The proposal for this thesis was designed in the winter of 2016 and submitted in spring 2017. The scope of the project then was too broad and focused only on nation branding and Kazakhstan, as reflected in a number of successful events such as EXPO-2017 and the Asian Olympic Games 2011 hosted by the country; achievements in the space industry; and, finally, the stunning worldwide success of the young singer Dimash Kudaibergen, with his voice range of six octaves. It became clear throughout the research that there was a need to narrow down its scope. In May 2018, a decade after *Borat* had opened and touched upon a wider debate on the image of Kazakhstan, I decided to work specifically on cinema, remembering my experience of 2006. However, at the time of choosing this direction, I had no idea that Kazakh cinema was in a transition period and on the cusp of a new Cinema Law, which is expected to reshape film policy in the country. Secondly, I realised that a nation-building approach is more suitable to analyse Kazakh cinema rather than a nation-branding perspective.

It goes without saying that this research landscape was constantly evolving while I was doing the research. The study benefited from many developments and changes. For example, the representatives of Kazakh cinema did not take unambiguously to the establishment of the State Centre for Support of National Cinema (SCSNC) in 2019, which was supposed to select the best projects for state funding, to ensure transparency and to lead the film industry from the centre. After the field trips and even during the writing-up period, there were ongoing corruption scandals around the SCSNC. The continuous tensions between the Joint Stock Company Kazakhfilm and the SCSNC, the two largest structures in the domestic film industry, and the information war between them continued until the dissertation's final touches were being made. In July 2020, the Ministry of Culture and Sport announced that the SCSNC and JSC Kazakhfilm were to work

together and all important decisions for the industry would be carried out in this way. This significant development had implications for how the findings of the first research question might be viewed. The aim of the reforms in film policy and the Cinema Law (2019) was to get rid of the old Soviet system and create a film centre that would deal with issues separately as a standalone institute. The study researched the SCSNC as a new, unique, and separate entity and this recent decision by the Ministry of Culture and Sport undermined the whole purpose of the Cinema Law and the recent efforts made towards creating an independent industry.

Although the focus of this thesis is contemporary, it is important to place it in an historical context. That is why the literature and academic publications I explored started from the early 20th century, when Kazakh cinema was established. It should be stressed that the analysis of Kazakh film genres and the different approaches (chronological and thematic) to analyse them were important starting points to see the links with nationalism theories, national identity theories and with cinema in Kazakhstan.

This research aimed to analyse the key issues surrounding Kazakh cinema at the crossroads of transition, which entailed an investigation of two case studies: cinema production and the EurIFF. These cases explore their influence on nation building.

Although the scope of the research was narrowed down in May 2018, the fieldwork did not begin until 2019 because of the need for extensive reading and writing. Secondly, it was almost impossible to plan ahead the dates of the field trips due to the late announcement of the dates of the EurIFF (see section 5.3.1). As there was a vast range of material that I had not mastered yet, I decided to split the fieldwork in Kazakhstan into two parts. The first took place between 15 February and 3 March, 2019, in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, where I interviewed key industry figures, directors, producers, film critics and scholars. This trip enabled me to go deeper into the research and to understand further the problems of Kazakh cinema from the film creators' standpoint.

The second stage of my fieldwork continued between 25 June, 2019, and 13 July, 2019. Within this time frame, I travelled as an observer to the EurIFF in the capital city, Nur-Sultan. There I managed to interview organisers, participants, international jurors, and guests of the film festival as well the key figures in the cinema industry, such as the SCSNC leadership. After completing the field trip in Nur-Sultan, I came back to Almaty and continued interviewing.

My first memory of a festival was attending the Pusan International Film Festival (South Korea) in 2008 as a journalist. I did this without realising that the event would become the basis for my festival knowledge for this research as well as giving me the opportunity to interview Nurzhyman Yktymbayev, the lead actor in *The Gift to Stalin* (2008), the drama by Kazakh director Rustem Abdirashev, which opened the prestigious festival. Eleven years later, I had a second chance to interview him as a researcher at the EurIFF in Nur-Sultan. Although these two festivals are the only ones I attended, they enabled me to learn the difference between reporting on and researching an event. Also, the two festivals provided me with valuable experience of being part of the cinematic culture of two industries: one of them leading the Asian sector, and the second one of Central Asia's rising stars on the international stage.

At the first attempt, it was hard to find a way of testing my arguments with the use of case studies. The research questions were too direct. Later, I collected a vast range of materials that laid the ground for further research. As stated by Yin (2018, p.84), it is essential to understand that "research is about questions and not necessarily about answers". This suggested to me that I needed to ask the right questions. These are the questions I came up with. I have answered these critical questions in the four empirical chapters that follow.

3.3 A case study approach

When it comes to the strengths of qualitative enquiry, Scott and Garner (2013, p.8) suggest:

Qualitative research is best suited for answering research questions that lend themselves to the analysis of a relatively small number of cases but a more significant number of attributes/variables.

Bearing this in mind, throughout the research in the first year, it became clear that to answer my three research questions (1. Who takes the decisions in the Kazakh cinema market and who controls it? 2. To what extent does the EurIFF contribute to nation building and to the projection of national identity? 3. What is the role of Kazakh cinema in nation building?) it would be more helpful to choose no more than two case studies to explore the issue. This study explores two central case studies (cinema production and the EurIFF) from a number of different angles, such as distribution, management, festival organisation and its audiences. Therefore, qualitative methodology is best suited to present this research and requires one to be more specific in one's goals (Berg, 2004). To address this, I followed the approach taken in case study research.

What a case study may consist of is much debated (Schwandt, 2018). Yin (2018), Swanborn (2010), and Gerring (2017) argue it can be anything - an event, an organisation, a person, regions, empires, or a nation-state. In this thesis, the Kazakhstan case is chosen as the main macro case, while cinema production and the EurIFF are considered as two micro cases. The research focus of a case study is "to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases" (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p.121): it is explained that researchers carrying out a case study explore groups of individuals who take part in an event or activity, so I focused on people in both of my micro cases. Even exploring large entities such as the nation-state, one should not disregard that it is people who act and react within them (Yin, 2018). Moreover, it is suggested:

Particularly, as is often the case in policy research, if the focus is on success or failure of policy measures, it is important to trace the ways in which behaviour is influenced by the interaction of people, and when and how behaviour changes. But also, more concretely, it is important to discover who helps or hinders whom, who tries to influence who, and which bottlenecks occur. (Ibid, p.26)

This approach assisted me in analysing the current status of Kazakh cinema production with its hidden secrets and challenges. Furthermore, it helped me to discover who makes the decisions in the field and who influences the decision-making process.

A case study is an empirical method that explores a “contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p.15). For me, the case study was one of the most challenging methods of all social science approaches, as well as being time-consuming (Swanborn, 2010). In order to be sure of this chosen method, I examined the assumptions, fundamentals and justification associated with it, which are outlined in detail in Schwandt (2018).

Also, the reason for choosing this method was due to its descriptive, causal, and inclusive framework. The definition of a causal case study is concentrated on a central hypothesis about how X affects Y (Gerring, 2017). This study, which explores the relationship of the cinema on nation building, is the causal case. However, I bear in mind that most case studies do not seek to assess a precise causal effect (Ibid, 2017) and there is no single comprehension of “case” in social sciences (Schwandt, 2018) and no single formula (Yin, 2018). That is why I did not try to determine the exact degree of the influence of Kazakh films on nation building.

3.4 The data collection

The main activity in qualitative enquiry is fieldwork (Patton, 2002). Initially, it was hard to accept that only the researcher can produce the data. Scott and Garner (2013, p.4) made plain why this is the case:

Information and data are not just “out there” lying around like apples fallen from a tree, waiting to be “collected” by the eager researcher; rather, the researcher brings the data into existence through her research choices and activities, which unfold in reference to the research questions. In a word, the qualitative researcher *produces* data.

Using this advice, I used a snowball technique as proposed by Bertaux (1981) where a respondent recommended the next one to me and shared their contact details. It is worth noting that most of the data were collected just a few months after the adoption of the Cinema Law in January 2019. Hence, the

material I collected reflects the situation before and after the law came into force, reflecting the real picture of Kazakh cinema in transition.

3.4.1 Challenges

As with any data collection process, both of my field trips faced enormous cultural, technical, and administrative difficulties. First, the question of gender was relevant. It would be much easier for the interviewer to set up a meeting with an elderly generation of directors and producers (the majority are male) if he/she was male or a foreigner rather than a local woman, like myself, wearing a headscarf, which can cause concern.²⁵ Also, finding female directors who wished to take part in this research was not easy as the genders split in Kazakh cinema in favour of male filmmakers. The question of ethnicity played a role as well. All interviewees, except four foreigners and two non-Kazakhs residing in Kazakhstan, belonged to the titular Kazakh nation, however, nearly half of them were so-called “Russified” city-born Kazakhs with limited knowledge of the mother tongue. This fact underpins the arguments detailed in Section 2.4 about urban-based Kazakhs.

Occasionally, there were individuals unwilling to assist me in my research or who were even obstructive. Some of the actors and directors were reluctant to give me an interview when they discovered that I did not have a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in film studies. In Kazakh academic culture, a researcher is expected to have one speciality from the start and stick to it. This coincides with Caldwell’s (2009, p.222) argument that when the researcher “wears two hats”, interviewees do not want to disclose information to outsiders to the field.

It took a lot of work to persuade some people, especially those in high positions. However, it was vital for developing a perspective from the inside (Creswell J.W. and Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, there were some cultural differences when dealing with Kazakh professionals. I bore in mind that beliefs, values and

²⁵ The majority of Kazakh people are ethnic Sovietised Muslims, who do not think you should make your religious beliefs visibly obvious. Such individuals believe it should just be seen as a state of mind rather than a religion to be put into practise. Secondly, the commonly held stereotype is that women in headscarves are not well educated and are also not likely to be studying abroad.

norms may lead to misunderstandings in elite interviews (Mikecz, 2012). Due to the Kazakh mentality, sometimes participants cancelled a meeting just hours before or else turned up late. For example, it took me more than one week to negotiate with one principal respondent and, finally, he cancelled our meeting just a few hours before the scheduled time. A researcher cannot plan a weekly or monthly timetable with interviewees in Kazakhstan as in the UK. For some frantically busy respondents, it was preferable to arrange a meeting just on the day, or sometimes just a few hours beforehand. I had to interview the renowned director, Rashid Nugmanov, twice, because our conversation lasted over an hour and he had another meeting scheduled.

However, the toughest challenges I faced were the numerous changes that occurred in the rapidly evolving research landscape. The events have unfolded at such lightning speed, changing as I write, that it has impacted on the accurate researching of this subject. The SCSNC was continually developing throughout the writing of this thesis. Since the adoption of the new Cinema Law in January 2019, the film production field has suffered modifications and alterations to some legal acts. When one chapter was nearly close to completion, the information in it became irrelevant to some degree. For instance, two prominent high-profile figures resigned in the space of one month: the Minister of Culture and Sport and the CEO of the SCSNC. Just one week after the completion of the fieldwork, the position in the SCSNC was taken over by another famous Kazakh producer, who was replaced again in November 2020. Overall, the numerous changes - such as the change of regime in Kazakhstan; renaming the capital; and the transition of film policy from the monopolist Kazakhfilm studio to a centralised brand, the new SCSNC - all impacted greatly on the research's accuracy. This necessitated keeping close track of Kazakh cinema news and developments on a daily basis.

To remedy the challenges posed by a combination of circumstances beyond my control, I decided to gather as much data and interview as many people as possible. Thus, during the festival, I had the further difficulty of balancing the need to rush between two venues to catch as many press conferences as possible, and the need to watch films.

Gaining access to “to closely guarded communities” and building trust is always problematic for researchers, especially when they try to build a bridge between academia and industry (Caldwell, 2009, p.2014) and between elite interviews and ethnographic practices (Herzog & Ali, 2015). Discussing social and cultural processes in interviewing film production workers, Caldwell (2008) explores distinct degrees of disclosure of information in different echelons of the media industry. Especially when it comes to difficult elite interviews, it takes much longer to negotiate with each of the industry workers, who may deliberately erect barriers (Mikecz, 2012). As Creswell J.W. and Creswell (2018) deduce, a researcher learns a lot by having to get permission to connect with institutions and organisations. Interestingly, though, with respect to my second case study, access to the EurIFF and its venues was relatively easy by sending a request by post to the Ministry of Culture and Sport five months beforehand, after taking into account Kazakhstan’s bureaucratic system. The late announcement of the dates of the festival meant I could not plan ahead. After numerous calls to one of the main organisers of the festival, Kanat Torebay, I succeeded in booking tickets, although the dates had not been revealed officially on the website, www.eiff.kz.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 caused challenges such as limited access to the library resources during the lockdown in the United Kingdom.

3.4.2 Interviews

In order to answer all three research questions, desk research into the history of Kazakh cinema with recent mass media observation and commentaries was combined with semi-structured interviews. The full list of the interviewees may be found in Appendix A.

There are certainly advantages and disadvantages to interviews. First of all, interviews as a qualitative inquiry allowed me to share the understandings and perceptions of the participants (Berg, 2004). This is the reason why I tried to interview people face-to-face. However, when people tell you stories, they provide the details of their personal experiences and therefore from within their

consciousness (Seidman, 2013). No wonder that Berger (2011) defines interviews as a dialogue between an interrogator and an informant. In his words, interviews are used in research because they give us data that we cannot get in any other way. However, Bryman (2016, p.493) suggests that “the interview relies primarily on verbal behaviour, and, as such, matters that interviewees take for granted are less likely to surface”. However, the interviews were taken alongside participant observation (see section 3.4.3) to circumvent this obstacle. All of the interviews in this study, except two, were undertaken face to face. This was a preference for me, though it is worth mentioning with respect to qualitative data, that the most crucial source is what people say, no matter how it is obtained, whether it be verbally or through a written interview (Patton, 2002).

Planning my interviews, I was thinking about the what, why, how, who, when, and where of interviewing (Seidman, 2013). I found the email addresses of the potential interviewees (if they had one) and sent an email indicating the purpose of my research. Making a networking visit in person ahead of the interview, as Seidman (1998) suggests, was not feasible due to time limits and geographical distance. The email correspondence was followed up with telephone calls or Facebook messages in some cases. One of the main privileges of interviews is that one can record it and, as long as one has a written record, it can be dissected in detail (Berger, 2011). I chose to conduct a series of interviews with Kazakhfilm directors, independent producers, and film professionals - 30 interviewees in total. These were all recorded.

It took a long time to choose which type of interview would be the most suitable for my research. Holstein (2002) distinguishes highly structured, standardised, quantitatively oriented survey interviews, semi-formal guided conversations and free-flowing informational exchanges, with all interviews being interactive. I found a semi-structured interview an essential way of conducting research (Gillham, 2005). However, following Holstein (2002), I did not limit all my interviews to semi-structured ones. In this respect I avoided the same questions for every participant due to the nature of my research and likewise avoided spending the same amount of time with every participant, as described by Gillham (2005).

I prepared a set of questions in advance that covered the main topics the interviewee could address. I used mainly open-ended questions and tried to make it a guided conversation (Yin, 2018). This enabled me to access the ideas of the informants. Patton (2002, p.21) advocates “not predetermining those points of view through a prior selection of questionnaire categories”. For instance, my questions at the EurIFF sounded more general rather than direct. For example: What is the agenda of the festival? In your opinion, how does the EurIFF cope with its tasks and aims? What is the targeted audience of the EurIFF? (see Appendix D). I took this approach because the objective of the interview was not to test the respondent’s assumptions, but to be interested in his/her lived experience (Seidman, 2013). I chose this type of interview because they were flexible enough and could be modified for the respondents, allowing me to extemporise during the interview (Scott and Garner, 2013).

My journalistic background had both advantages and disadvantages, which affected the direction of the research. This was particularly the case with respect to such a time-consuming activity as conducting an interview. On the one hand, my previous work as a journalist helped me communicate easily with people; I was able to negotiate and persuade them to cooperate. Also, I already had a useful network, which provided me with contact details of the potential interviewees. On the other hand, it also interfered because, at times, I interrupted the respondents by asking them too direct journalistic questions. In a few cases this affected the progress of the interview as the answers were too short. However, I decided, first of all to bear in mind Seidman’s (1998) message that interviewing provides access to the environment of people’s behaviour, which helps a researcher uncover its meaning. Secondly, interviews require our actions as interviewers to indicate that others’ narratives are significant. Thirdly, I have learned that the difference between qualitative interviews and a journalistic interview is that the first one aims at “listening hard to access the progress of the interview and to stay alert for cues about how to move the interview forward as necessary” (Seidman, 2013, p.82). In addition, as Holstein (2002, p.112) remarks, “the interview conversation is a pipeline for transmitting knowledge”, which I hope this thesis has achieved. Finally, I took into account

Caldwell's (2009) argument that the professional identity of the researcher may impact on the disclosure of information, in particular during elite interviews.

I avoided interviewing people by email because, as Seidman (2013, p.113) puts it, "spontaneity of oral responses" could thus be lost. However, one interview with the actor and director Doskhan Zholzhaksynov and producer Ilyas Akhmet took place over the phone due to the incompatibility of our schedules.²⁶ I used a loudspeaker on my mobile phone and a digital recorder. As argued by Braun and Clarke (2013, p.79), a telephone interview can be regarded as an extension of the traditional method. However, Bryman (2016, p.203) suggests that although this method is quicker and cheaper, it has certain limitations. For example, the interviewer cannot be involved in observation, which works well during personal conversations. In addition to several disadvantages of telephone interviews, Frey and Oishi (1995, p.37) note that the telephone interviews are successful if they take no more than 50 minutes. Nevertheless, the conversation with the actor lasted for more than an hour and provided useful data (see Appendix A).

In terms of the length of the conversations, most of my interviews lasted an hour or so. The longest one was two-and-a-half hours with an anonymous informant, whereas the shortest conversation, with Parliament Deputy Bekbolat Tileukhan, took just 17 minutes. No matter how long the interviews lasted, almost all of them gave me valuable insights and, most importantly, data to analyse.

Following the advice given by my supervisors, I used two digital recorders in case one of them stopped working and took notes in my diary to accompany the audio-recording (King, 2009). These tips worked well in all cases.

I carried out interviews, for the most part, both in Kazakh and in the Russian language in order to be as flexible as possible for my respondents. The percentage ratio of Kazakh/Russian interviews was 56 per cent to 30 per cent, respectively, with the rest either in mixed Kazakh/Russian or in English.

²⁶ Doskhan Zholzhaksynov gave me an interview over the phone on his way back to Almaty. The producer Ilyas Akhmet was interviewed later in October 2020, while I was in Glasgow.

I tried to include in the list of interviewees people with a variety of positions to make the research diverse (King, 2009). I divided the list into elite-level and expert-level of interviewees. The latter is an open conversation with people holding “expert knowledge” (Van Audenhove and Donders, 2019, p.179). Elite interviews are those who hold powerful positions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In this case, Parliament Deputy Bekbolat Tileukhan, Chairman of the Board of the SCSNC Andrey Khazbulatov, as well as the EurIFF organiser Kanat Torebay, comprised the elite-level block. I also sought an interview with political figures, such as the former and current Ministers of Culture and Sport of Kazakhstan, Arystanbek Mukhamediuly and Aktoty Raiymkulova. The first was extremely difficult to contact while, with the second, I did not manage to conduct an interview at all, due to some unforeseen circumstances.

Apart from those mentioned above, I had the good fortune to interview key figures in the Kazakh film industry: the accomplished actor Asanali Ashimov and actor and screenwriter Nurlan Sanzhar; prominent director Satybaldy Narymbetov; the Kazakh New Wave directors Rashid Nugmanov, Darezhan Omirbayev and Sabit Kurmanbekov; the film critic Gulnara Abikeyeva; and many other participants of the festival. All of them were quite enthusiastic about telling their stories, and, so far as can be judged, were scrupulously honest. By focusing on senior speakers, I took it that I was able to explore the Kazakh cinema industry extensively by interviewing people who had been working in this field for a long time and knew all pitfalls of the industry. My list of the informants was not limited to those long in the field, but also promising up-and-coming directors such as Adilkhan Yerzhanov, Serik Abishev, Zhandos Yespenbetov and the film scholars Baubek Nogerbek and Alma Aidar. In this way, I manage to get a range of views.

Although some quotations from a couple of interviewees (for instance, Asanali Ashimov and Askhat Kuchincherekov) were not included in the final draft of the thesis, the information given by them gave me a valuable flavour of the topics.

3.4.3 Observation and the research diary

There is good evidence to suggest that observation is one of the most practical methods for qualitative research. As Scott and Garner (2013) put it, observations

cannot be easily counted and measured, but they can be written, spoken about, filmed, and explained. This feature of the method worked well at the EurIFF, where I was able to observe detailed examples of people's habits, behaviour, performance, and the full range of interpersonal interplay (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, as described by Flick (2018), observation is when a researcher enters the field and tries to become a part of it. This is what I tried to implement to a great extent at the EurIFF by attending all press conferences and master classes. My aim was not only to visit the official events but to observe what happens backstage as it was a further data collection activity (Yin, 2018).

I have chosen participant observation as a complementary activity (Scott and Garner, 2013) mainly for my second case study, because this method allows the researcher to understand the environment of the respondents more deeply than is entirely possible by using only interviews (Patton, 2002, p.22) as the researcher's notes become "the eyes, ears and perceptual senses for the reader". In this respect, the notes in my research diary helped me to paint a picture of the cases. I tried to make observations purely descriptive, though some thoughts and deliberations that I recorded were used as data to be analysed separately, thus reinforcing my methodological understanding (King, 2009). Notes in the diary helped me to pay close attention to things that I had missed while listening to the recorded data. This is supported by Scott and Garner (2013), who note that observation is a method that allows us to check discrepancies that arise in other research activities. During the pitching of co-production projects at the EurIFF, detailed description of every film from the mouths of film producers or dialogue and Q&A sessions with jurors helped me build an overall understanding of the extent to which the festival was transparent and equitable in terms of prize-giving and screenings. Also, I observed that there was a lack of foreigners in attendance, with all the guests at the press conferences and film screenings being invited participants in the contest. These facts added another element for reflection to my study.

Furthermore, participant observation enabled me to get close to the informants and interact with them "in a variety of different situations" and "observe behaviour directly" (Bryman, 2016, p.493). This happened during a face-to-face interview with the film scholar Alma Aidar. When speaking about Kazakh films,

she noted how the auteur's films, in particular, cannot compete with foreign products and cannot find their way to an audience, and in saying this her eyes were full of tears. This emotion was acknowledged and noted in my research diary. I paid attention to the eye movements, gestures, intonation, and pauses during interviews, which undoubtedly, could say more in some cases than the words. Therefore, participant observation added value and "flavour" to the project. Another example was when observing the backstage process of the EurIFF provided me with a deep understanding of the advantages and shortcomings of the event, which I will explore in greater detail below (see Chapter 5).

3.5 Transcribing and translating data

The transcribing process is time-consuming and so needs special attention. Transcribing the data from two visits to Kazakhstan together took almost five weeks. As both field trips involved 30 respondents, this activity took longer than I expected.

I chose a conservative way to reproduce the data manually. First of all, contemporary software does not recognise the Kazakh language when you try to transfer audio files into written format. Secondly, the process of transcribing may unveil for the researcher new analytical thoughts which may be exceptionally helpful.

All questions for semi-structured interviews were prepared in English. However, for Kazakh and Russian speakers, the questions were delivered in a language they were comfortable with. Some speech characteristics such as American and Australian accents (those of international producers in Chapter 7) were harder to understand.

Although my bilingualism helped me a lot while conducting interviews, the most challenging aspect for me was translating data from Kazakh/Russian into English accurately. I needed to transfer a lengthy conversation into a coherent narrative. This meant that this specific process was labour consuming, given that I translated the transcripts myself. I tried to reflect in the quotes that I chose to analyse the tone and manner of the interviewee. However, I eliminated

repetitive thoughts, non-verbal utterances, and emotions to keep the data more focused.

3.6 Data analysis

Data analysis requires the researcher to discuss in detail the different social processes people use to support their social realities (Berg, 2004). Patton (2002, p.432) offers an excellent example of the traditional approach to analysis:

Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe.

I followed this approach and started the work of analysis by filtering the empirical information and excluding irrelevant materials. After a careful line-by-line reading, I used the topical coding technique, the “pencil-and-paper strategy”, to query and make my data responsive (Bazeley, 2013). I labelled every passage of transcribed interviews with a thematic code, which enabled me to pull together similar information and sort it out accordingly. Some scholars (Creswell J.W. and Creswell, 2018) define this task as ambitious. As soon as I had analytic ideas and aims I wanted to pursue, I used a memo writing technique, which some scholars find provides “more depth and complexity than codes” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.214). Also, I used dating and identifiable captions (Creswell J.W. and Creswell, 2018). It helped me to connect the selected data with research questions and to have a good sense of the scope of each theme.

In this study, I interpreted the data with detailed descriptions. Descriptive interpretation plays a pivotal role in case study research (Ibid, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2013) distinguish between two ways of treating data extracts in qualitative analysis: 1) as illustrative examples; 2) by analysis of the content of the extract itself. The second interpretive form of analysis, proposed by Miles (2014), was more challenging to adapt at first as I stayed too close to my data. I tried to inform the reader by using quotations, whereas my aim was supposed to be to analyse them. Sometimes two types of interpretation were combined so that the study moved from its original descriptive meaning to a more explanatory model (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

In analysing my data, I tried to avoid disclosing only positive results (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and to be fair and honest. Also, as part of my analysis I watched every film which was relevant to this study and made my own evaluation. I used my own notes and accounts of the plot summaries in the thesis based on my own viewings. I chose a selection of relevant films for Chapter 2 by picking up the most interesting ones, in my personal opinion (I had watched them all before), from the work of key scholars who had researched Kazakh cinema (Abikeyeva and Isaacs).

3.7 Ethics

In creating a qualitative research design, it is essential to consider what ethical issues may arise and to plan in advance how these things need to be addressed (Creswell J.W. and Creswell, 2018). Ethical clearance for this project was granted by the College of Arts Research Ethics committee in 2019 (100180060), which was given to protect the interests, rights and dignity of those who agreed to take part in my research (Flick, 2018). Informed consent forms (see Appendix E) were distributed via email in advance to the director Adilkhan Yerzhanov and the producer Serik Abishev, although they signed on the date of the interview. Other participants were given consent forms, as well as an information letter in English, Kazakh, and Russian, while I was explaining the nature of the research face-to-face. In the information letter (see Appendix F), I tried to include as much information as possible so that participants could decide on the nature of their involvement (Greener, 2011).

When it comes to data management, I organised my data by keeping track of the participants, making sure that all consent forms were signed and kept in a safe place (Seidman, 2013). I labelled each of the audio files and saved them in a password-protected laptop for the time of thesis writing so no one would be able to access them.

The anonymity of the participants is a crucial ethical issue. In the “consent for the use of data” form, each participant was given the option to remain anonymous. In this study, only one respondent wished to do so. His/her wish was

withheld, and I saved the transcribed interview without typing the interviewee's name on my Word file (Flick, 2018). The respondent was informed that the data would be anonymised, and his/her confidentiality guaranteed.

Discussing some logistical considerations, Seidman (2013, p.53) suggests that the venue "should be one in which the participant feels comfortable and secure". Some interlocutors invited me to their homes according to Kazakh hospitality, but I refused, as our ethical regulations state that a researcher must meet with the respondents in a safe public space. Also, no criminal, dangerous, or forbidden activities that might harm participants or leave them vulnerable (Flick, 2018) were chosen for this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview of the methodological positions demanded of this research. It has reflected on the research design I chose in order to answer the research questions as well as the connection between these questions and the data collection and analysis processes. Moreover, the chapter has stated the reasons and justifications for choosing a case study approach.

Further, the chapter has highlighted the challenges I faced during both field trips to Kazakhstan. After that, I explained the process of semi-structured interviews in line with using a research diary in observation. Following this, I discussed transcribing and translating data process and data analysis, highlighting the memos and thematic coding, which were both labour-consuming but enjoyable for me. Finally, I examined the ethical considerations.

Adopting the research methods explained in this chapter, I will move on to the first empirical chapter where the original findings are presented. Chapter 4 will explore the thorny path of transition for Kazakh cinema with some historical background, paying special attention to topical and burning issues affecting the growth and popularity of Kazakh films locally and internationally.

4 Kazakh cinema in transition

Introduction

This chapter is the first chapter of substantive findings and addresses my first research question: Who takes the decisions in Kazakh cinema market and who controls it? The question will be answered through in-depth analysis of the materials drawn from the interviews taken in Kazakhstan. To answer the research question, I will be examining views on the new Cinema Law, adopted in January 2019, in order to see how much it is likely to reshape the cultural policy towards cinema in Kazakhstan. The key question will be whether it can bridge the gap between the three parts of the cinema community: distributors, exhibitors, and producers.

Furthermore, this chapter will focus on the main challenges of film production as well as what influences the current state of Kazakh cinema from a cultural policy angle. The aim will be to look at issues within Kazakh cinema that obstruct the growth of the industry. It focuses on the dependency of the sector on its political, financial context.

4.1 Debates around the Cinema Law 2019

Up to 2019, there were only six articles in the Law on Culture that impacted on cinema production. These were set in place on 24 December, 1996, with further amendments on 15 December, 2006.²⁷ The earlier law was far too general to have much significance. There was no specific legal framework to define how cinema should function with respect to production, distribution, storage, archiving or digitisation (Mukanova, 2017). There is little dispute, therefore, that film policy had long been unfit for purpose. Up to this point, the state did little more than issue a rental license for a film and assign it an age index.

²⁷ Under the general umbrella of culture (cinema, museums, literature, theatre, library, concerts, circus), it witnessed many amendments between 2006 and 2018.

In the early 1990s, the public organisation for professionals in the film industry, the Union of Filmmakers had proposed many projects for the purpose of bringing in new legislation. In the second half of the 1990s, a series of projects was put out to tender for the purpose of reforming the film industry. Despite countless attempts at implementation, the legislation was not passed. One interviewee notes how, in the second half of 1990s, heated battles took place around cinema development:

We argued a lot. Because I spoke up a lot about problems with respect to cinema, it had a negative impact on my career²⁸ and life in general. The Law was not adopted at that time because the people who worked in this field and those who ran Kazakh cinema thought only about money. (Anonymous interviewee, 2019)

This implies that those prepared to speak about urgent problems in the film industry put themselves on the leadership's blacklist. The Law was not advantageous for the Kazakhfilm studio, because it would lose power and money if any amendments were made to the process of project funding. Personal interests were placed higher than those of the public. The suggestion here is also that the majority of filmmakers, who worked within the old, traditional system of Kazakhfilm, were not willing to change as they were too set in their ways.

In another interviewee's opinion, the lack of legislative acts, film policy and activity in cinema led to the following problems:

We have every director on his own, attempting to get financial backing for his productions, just negotiating somehow or other with those who distribute money. We have no strategy, no common vision, no governing body/council or board that could oversee the process. We do not have a national centre. Our cinema is like a ship without a captain. (Gulnara Abikeyeva, President of the Association of Film Critics of Kazakhstan,²⁹ interview, 2019)

Here, Abikeyeva is suggesting that there was no link between the older and younger generations and chose the term "a ship without a captain" to describe the disadvantaged position of many working within Kazakh cinema. She was flagging up the fundamental problem that Kazakh directors struggled to promote

²⁸ The informant thought that because of his frank views he was not offered jobs.

²⁹ Independent association of leading experts in the field of film critics and film journalism in Kazakhstan.

their films internationally. If one makes a comparison with, say, the Institut Français in France, in its case there is worldwide distribution of non-commercial French movies via libraries, museums, universities and festivals. Also, state programmes such as UniFrance, French Film Festival USA, MyFrenchFilmFestival and Tournées Festival contribute to the international circulation of French film art (Harris, 2018). Although Kazakhstan did not have particular institutes to promote local films abroad, Kazakhfilm's international cooperation department was making an effort to participate in international film festivals. However, these efforts were not sufficient to provide adequate promotion for Kazakh films.

The chasm between film policy and cinema development spawned a new wave of discussions about the need for a Cinema Law. In February 2016, Senate Deputy Dariga Nazarbayeva, the elder daughter of the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, ordered a draft of the Concept for the Development of Cinematography to 2050 to be worked on (Kazakh Research Institute of Culture, 2017). The concept included a chain of regulations, as well as the Cinema Law. The main aim was for Kazakhstan to gain entry into the 30 best countries in the world in terms of the development of national cinema (Kazakh Research Institute of Culture, 2016). The new legislative actions, initiated by the Senate, were discussed over 2016-2018. More than 10 public hearings on the project were held in Almaty and Nur-Sultan organised by the Kazakh Research Institute of Culture for the Ministry of Culture and Sport (MCS). The draft of the new law was discussed by all leading Kazakhstani filmmakers, producers, and distributors, as well as experts from France, the USA and Russia. Also, the most advanced experience of leading countries such as the UK, Italy, Germany, Korea, China, and others were studied for the purpose of comparison (Kazakh Research Institute of Culture, 2018).

The Cinema Law has three main goals. The first is to support the production of national films; the second, to ensure particular priority for national films over foreign ones in film distribution; the third is the release of Kazakhstani films to the world market, including via joint film production and co-production with leading world film companies (Kazakhstan, Parliamentary Debates, 2018). The overall task is to eliminate the monopolistic system of film funding through JSC

Kazakhfilm and to ensure equitable sharing of state support to all studios functioning in Kazakhstan.

It is worth noting that the Law draft was supported by all 106 deputies of the lower chamber of Mazhilis in parliament. None of them abstained from voting and none of them was against it. New legislation, including the creation of a new film centre, spawned much controversy but more so among the filmmakers than the deputies.

4.2 The State Centre for Support of National Cinema: Kazakh Cinema

Due to the implementation of the Cinema Law, the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan issued decree № 113 on 15 March, 2019, on the establishment of the State Centre for Support of National Cinema (A. Raiymkulova, personal communication, 5 April 2019). The chairman of the SCSNC set out the main task of the Centre as a need to develop national cinema and increase the number of film projects receiving state support:

SCSNC will be engaged in the rental and screening of national films, including reproduction, dubbing, subtitling, or voice-over, and advertising. It will work on the participation of national movies at international film festivals, the organisation of Kazakh film days and other events aimed at promoting national films abroad. (Andrey Khazbulatov, chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, interview, 2019)

Here he makes plain how the SCSNC sets multitasks and tries to establish clear systematic procedures. In addition to this quote, the official website www.kazakhcinema.kz underlines that the state does not only finance, distribute and release movies, it also deals with attracting investment to the film industry. If we compare this system to the UK's, where the model of national cinema support was first elaborated in the early 20th century (Schlesinger, 2015), from its inception, the UK Film Council (UKFC) endorsed other film-related bodies such as the British Film Commission, British Screen Finance and the Lottery Film Department of the Arts Council, as well as the production and regional funding functions of the British Film Institute (BFI), implementing the idea of a unitary film body. Secondly, the UKFC was a non-

departmental government agency which worked closely with the government (Ibid). In this sense, the SCSNC replicates the UKFC as a unitary body regulating film-related issues in Kazakhstan (although the UKFC was closed down, and most of its functions were transferred to the BFI in 2011). As such, it can be said that the SCSNC combines the task of being a Film Institute along with being the sole operator of cinema state policy.

However, some interviewees were very much opposed to the creation of a new film centre and funding model.

It will be just like my pockets [shows his pockets]. You know, you see me hiding the money here, but when you look you discover my pockets are empty. It ends up being a secret pocket. All the money is kept in one place. The SCSNC should be part of the Ministry of Culture and Sport, not something separate. [...] Otherwise, we will fall into the pit at some point. It will be the old story, someone will steal the money, or there will be some corruption scandal. This is the way it's heading. You mark my words. The SCSNC has been created to steal money. (Nurzhyman Yktymbayev, actor, interview, 2019)

This outspoken statement deserves a more in-depth examination. Corruption is an output of the country's history, culture, social development, and environment (Brooks, 2016). Corruption may include different acts, such as "bribery, extortion, graft, embezzlement, and various forms of fraud. Acts such as patronage or influence peddling are widely practiced by many who hold political office" (Kratcoski, 2018, p.3). All of these types of corruption appear in the news daily in Kazakhstan. It is not likely, therefore, that film production will avoid corruption. There is, for example, the case where the highly respected actor and producer Tungyshbai Zhamankulov accused the former Minister of Culture and Sport, Arystanbek Mukhamediuly, of stealing money from the unfinished *Phoenix* project in 2016. As a result, the minister threatened the actor with prison. After being given exemption from criminal liability, Zhamankulov recorded a video asking President Nazarbayev to resolve the issue (Koskina, 2016). Even after such a shocking scandal, Mukhamediuly did not resign until the new president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, appointed a new minister in the spring of 2019. Some sources say that this was because Mukhamediuly was from the same Elder Horde as President Nazarbayev. If so, this supports the argument that tribalism (see section 2.5) and cronyism persist in the film sector, generating a struggle for power.

Take the example of another bribery scandal, when the director Adilkhan Yerzhanov, while receiving an award for Best Director at the closing ceremony of the 12th EurIFF in Almaty, accused the vice-president of Kazakhfilm, Serik Zhubandykov, of stealing \$232,220 out of \$290,275³⁰ allocated by the Ministry of Culture and Sport (Tugelbayeva, 2016). These examples point to the possible risk of “black bookkeeping” where some funds are shared with higher officials. Discussing “persuasive” motives for bribery and fraud in the Post-Soviet space, Karklins (2005, p.72) argues:

People in the post-communist region have certain patterns of thinking and acting that affect the level of corruption in society. [...] People have many excuses for this: the acts they engage in are rather innocent, “everybody else does it,” they need to engage in them to survive, and they would lose out by not participating. The summary view is that “the system” makes them do it, they are forced to act in certain ways due to red tape, poor laws and law enforcement, and the unresponsiveness of the state to their needs. Often a bribe that expedites the resolution of a problem is considered normal.

This is possibly one of the most commonly held beliefs within Kazakh society, given the system itself is seen by many to be corrupt. The film industry and those in control of film policy consist of people with a Soviet and post-Soviet way of thinking, where illegality, bribery and fraud were rife, putting a spoke in the wheel of the film industry.

One of the most unexplained events was the quick change of leadership within the SCSNC, which influenced the course of policy within the organisation. Andrey Khazbulatov, who had been working hard on promoting and implementing the Cinema Law, was unexpectedly replaced by producer Gulnara Sarsenova just after the 15th EurIFF in July 2019. The new leadership reorganised the structure of the SCSNC as well as the whole staff. They also made a quickfire change of the English name from Kazakhstan Film Commission to Kazakh Cinema, while simultaneously changing the website from www.filmkazakhstan.kz to www.kazakhcinema.kz. This did not create much confidence in the stability or reliability of the management in cultural and film policy. Again, the new leadership, now under Gulnara Sarsenova, in May 2020, was accused of large-

³⁰ \$ equivalent to tenge was calculated with the average index of 2016, when EurIFF XII took place. It is £173,900 out of £217,000.

scale bribery with respect to fund allocation (Sagiyev, 2020). In November 2020 Sarsenova herself was replaced by Yesetzhan Kosubayev, who previously headed the Ministry of Culture, Information and Sport in 2004-2006, led media companies, and organised various projects in the cultural field (Zakon.kz., 2020b). Kanat Torebay, the executive director of EurIFF in 2019, who works closely with director Yermek Tursunov, was appointed as Deputy Chairman of the Board of SCSNC in December 2020. However, earlier, in July 2020, actors, filmmakers and honoured workers of Kazakhstan (including the new head of the SCSNC, Kosubayev) addressed a letter of complaint to the President of Kazakhstan, Tokayev, just after the appointment of director Akan Satayev to the post of President of Kazakhfilm Studio. They believed that the previous head of Kazakhfilm, Arman Assenov, was in charge for only 10 months and the Ministry of Culture and Sport did not let him work effectively (Auespekova, 2020). Interestingly, the former head of Kazakhfilm, Arman Assenov, revealed that the Ministry of Culture and Sport persuaded him to write a “voluntary” resignation letter offering the position of the head of the SCSNC on 8 July, 2020, after the bribery scandal with Sarsenova. However, he was suspended from Kazakhfilm but was not offered a new job promised by the Minister of Culture and Sport, Aktoty Raiymkulova (Hrabryh, 2020). Thus, frequently changing the head of the SCSNC reflects the never-ending hidden power struggles and internal intrigues in implementing film policy as well as ongoing corruption. However, one of the major innovations in the film industry implemented by the SCSNC that gives slight hope is a new electronic ticket system.

4.2.1 Statistical data and the new electronic ticket system

Statistical research in planning cinema production is vital. However, its role has been underestimated in Kazakhstan. Interestingly, these days, all of the statistics on the Kazakh cinema market are held by the Russian company Nevafilm, based in St Petersburg. The website of the company, www.nevafilm.ru, sells ready-made analytical annual reports on the Kazakhstani, Belorussian and Russian cinema markets.³¹ The next interviewee

³¹ For instance, one analytical report costs ₸25,000 (Russian rubles), which is approximately £250.

explained how Russia gets access to all analytical data on the Kazakh film system:

Nevafilm, being in Russia, has access to Russian distributors. That means that 99 per cent of our cinema comes through Russia. We do not have direct distribution with the West. [...] That is why all statistics on Kazakhstan are concentrated in Russia. This is our great misfortune. Nevafilm makes the money. (Bauyrzhan Shukenov, director of Arman cinema network, interview, 2019)

Indeed, there is no single data source for the number of films imported and exported into the country, or where they are distributed or how often shown. There is no single source of information on the number of daily sessions, tickets sold or statistics on audience numbers. For this reason, it was impossible to get an objective picture of the film market or of film production and film distribution activities (Timurova, 2018). Along with this, box office statistics and film attendance are still rarely disclosed by its producers (Leontyeva et al., 2019). Statistical data depends on the distributors' country of origin. A third point is that not only statistics, but all aspects of the Kazakh cinema market, and its distribution in particular, depends on neighbouring Russia (see section 4.3). Moreover, it was Nevafilm who prepared a catalogue for the first Kazakhstan Pavilion at the Marché du Film at Cannes in May 2017 (Nevafilm, 2017). We may assume that this dependency on the Russian market will be ongoing as Kazakhstan does not distribute films directly but only through Russia.

Testimony from Bauyrzhan Shukenov is supported by the fact that all the available statistical recent research in the Kazakhfilm studio was done 10 years ago. The national report on the status of the film industry in the Republic of Kazakhstan - which is out of date now - was ordered by the Moscow-based Movie Research Company (MRC) in 2009. Along with this, the first vice-president of Kazakhfilm studio, Serik Zhubandykov, explained: "As a film production organisation there is no service in the Kazakhfilm studio structure which could collect requested statistical data and provide analytical processing" (S. Zhubandykov, personal communication, 26 March 2019). That said, since 2015 the studio's International Cooperation Department has been keeping a private record of all its films which have been included in international film festivals (Ibid). But this ad hoc data aside, it is clear that since 2009 there has been no

in-depth analysis of the film industry which would meet the criteria of a high-profile marketing and research approach required by the government.

In 2020, the SCSNC launched its electronic ticket procedure, based on the Russian unified federal automated information system, which has been working in Russia since May 2014 (Kazakh Cinema, 2020a). This, in turn, would possibly solve the issue of statistical data, enabling the research market to become independent. A visible example of such success is the comedy, *Offline Holidays 2*, which was the first commercial product to be funded and distributed by the SCSNC. The film is a sequel to an earlier comedy where three young men create a village-camp project. In this camp, leaders encourage urban russified children to learn the Kazakh language and traditions while living in traditional yurts without gadgets. According to the new electronic ticket data, by the middle of January 2020 the film had grossed more than ₸200 million tenges (over £359,000 or \$469,750), while SCSNC funding came to 20 per cent of the total budget (Ibid). However, even though its use makes the box office transparent, it still does not solve the fact that Western films have dominance over Kazakhstani ones. Nevafilm, which gives industry data on all of the Commonwealth of Independent State,³² may, in this respect, produce more reliable and extensive data on the Kazakh film market.

4.2.2 A new funding model compared to the old one

Before the adoption of the Cinema Law in 2019, it was Kazakhfilm which allocated state funds between selected winners. After approval by the MCS, JSC Kazakhfilm used to receive the bulk of this funding. Of ₸5-6 billion (over £8,978,000 - £10,773, 000) of the annual state budget for film production, they received more than ₸4 billion (over £7,182,000) (Abdrakhmanova, 2017). During 2015-2018, 20 features, 67 documentaries and four animated films were produced by order of the MSC (www.parlam.kz, 2018). Interviewees pointed out that the first problem with this was a slowdown of projects. As the famous actor Nurlan Sanzhar and screenwriter explained: “It takes seven to eight years for our

³² CIS is the organisation that regulates the relationships between the post-Soviet states.

films to come out. The script of my last film, *Oralman (The Returnee)*³³ was accepted in 2013, but we weren't able to make it till 2017. This was just downtime while it waited for funding" (Nurlan Sanzhar, screenwriter for JSC Kazakhfilm, interview, 2019). This makes it abundantly clear that it took an unreasonably long time to produce a film with state funds. Although every country's cinema can face similar obstacles, many levels of bureaucracy may break and weaken the whole cinema architecture of the country. This issue demonstrates a low level of government encouragement in film production, which, no doubt, leads to a lack of interest.

The second argument for the disadvantages of the old system given by the informants was the overfunding of historical films. In this regard, a representative of the 1990s New Wave, and one of the directors who works closely with French filmmakers, Darezhan Omirbayev, complains:

I understand that we must have historical films, films about politics. However, they shouldn't be prioritised over other films. First of all, the Government should support cinema to produce a real piece of art. Such films [historical dramas] never recoup their costs even if the whole of Kazakhstan, including small children and older adults go to see them two or three times. It's a waste of money. (Darezhan Omirbayev, director, interview, 2019)

Omirbayev made it clear that the Kazakh government wastes huge amounts of money on historical films, allowing them to dominate the industry with no economic benefit. This is obviously the case when we see that six out of 13 feature films produced by Kazakhfilm in 2018 can be regarded as historical (Isayeva, 2019). The director Omirbayev, whose first profession was mathematics, calculates that the government loses money: "The film *Nomad* (see Figure 16) has swallowed more than \$30 million. It could be spent on 100 films if we divide it by \$300,000. Kazakhfilm could have lived 50 years without any worries by producing five art house films per year" (interview, 2019). It is clear from this that Kazakhfilm, with its monopoly over state funds, was allocating money where it liked with absolutely no accountability with respect to the financial benefits. Here Smith's (1998) argument on ethno-symbolism applies

³³ A film about a three-generation Kazakh family that decides to go back to the historical motherland from Afghanistan after many decades (see section 2.2.3).

(see section 2.1). Kazakhstan has tried to reconstruct its national identity through its historical films. These films, as symbols, played the role of “powerful differentiators” (Smith, 1998, p.191) from other nations. However, the idea that the recognition of ethnic heroes from the mythical past is not widely supported by filmmakers causes misunderstanding between two sides.

Indeed, the state’s inability to recoup losses with such a small population is one of the biggest issues. As another interviewee states: “We have only 200,000 cinema-goers in the whole of Kazakhstan. These are people who are serious film-goers. There is a fierce struggle to claim this audience by Hollywood, as well as Russian, European and Kazakhstani film companies” (Anna Darmodekhina, press officer of Meloman company, interview, 2019). Making historical movies is an unbelievably costly experience for Kazakhstan with potentially low revenues domestically and internationally. Take the case of Australia, comparable to Kazakhstan, with a vast territory and small population. Australian films do not export well and have never competed at high levels with foreign films because local consumers are less interested in domestic films (Mackenzie and Rossiter, 2018). Therefore, Kazakhstan needs not only to trigger more national audience participation to increase revenue for expensive historical pictures but also to generally lift its movie culture and raise an awareness of national films.

In order to solve the burning issues of film production, the Cinema Law (2019) set out a new system of funding aiming to destroy the old stereotypes. This involved greater partnership working to assist in decision-making. The groups involved are outlined in a flow chart below (see Figure 17). The Expert Council (EC), reviews and selects the best projects and sends the recommendations to the Interdepartmental Commission, consisting of representatives from several ministries and deputies from the social and cultural sphere. They then send their decision to the MSC, which makes a request to the Republican Budget Commission to fund the projects. Finally, a State Meeting approves finance for the production of films of national interest.

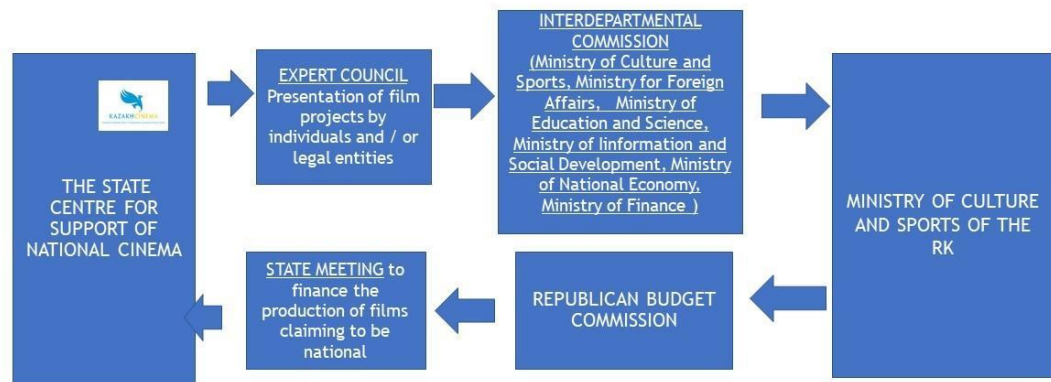


Figure 17 Project financing scheme by the SCSNC from 2019 (Film Qazaqstan, 2019).

There is a clear system for allocation of funds. Socially significant films are given 100 per cent of their budget (children's films, social films, animation, debut films and historical films). Co-productions are financed within the limits outlined in relevant agreements with foreign companies. All other commercial films are to be given between 10 and 70 per cent, based on the terms required to attract investors and private capital. For the first time, the Law is taking into consideration a state requirement to balance the books. Companies that have received support for the production of socially significant films and debut films up to 100 per cent will be required to pay 20 per cent of the income from rentals to the SCSNC. The remaining recipients will return funds in an amount that is proportionate to the percentage of financial support.

It is crucial to query why this publicly funded film selection process has to be so cumbersome and the implications that it will have on the film industry. The former leadership of the SCSNC explained:

Let's say the Expert Council would like 30 or 60 projects out of 80. But it doesn't know the limits of the financing. Then it is not in a position to make decisions on financing films. This will lead to backlogs. So, the decision has to be made by authorised bodies like the Ministry of Culture and Sport, but only subject to agreement with this interdepartmental

commission. (Andrey Khazbulatov, chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, interview, Nur-Sultan, 2019)

Although this type of model has never been in place in Kazakhstan before, we can perhaps learn from how such a system operates in other countries. It is illuminating, therefore, to look again at an international example. The New Zealand government, which regulates the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) through the NZFC Act 1978, works closely through its ministries to support film funding. For example, the Ministry of Business works to boost economic development by attracting various productions to the country. The Ministry for Culture and Heritage (MCH) controls government funding for the NZFC and appoints seven members of its board. However, as Ferrer-Roca (2018, p.358) observes there are power struggles similar to those that have surfaced in Kazakhstan's Cinema Law. Although it is noted that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) seeks international opportunities and deals with co-production agreements, "the NZFC is influenced by inter-ministry tensions that result from different policy priorities". Therefore, one can detect clear alarm bells here, in that the same is likely to happen in the Kazakhstani Expert Council (EC) - as I will now discuss. In comparison to the NZFC, there are six ministries in Kazakhstan's interdepartmental commission,³⁴ which can lead to tensions that might be even greater than in New Zealand.

Furthermore, the financial policy may restrict the release of different genres of films. Many studios, in order to get 100 per cent of funding from the government, will promote the production of socially significant films. Genres which are not popular in official Kazakhstani film production, for instance, horror films and psychological dramas, might not be developed. Moreover, all the income to the SCSNC from the invested-in films will be directed toward the development of the cinema industry and the creation of new films. For the public interest, this raises the question of how to promote quality films that are less likely to make a big profit. One interviewee, Alma Aidar, a doctor and senior

³⁴ The Interdepartmental Commission includes deputies of the parliament, representatives of the ministries of information and social development, foreign affairs, the national economy, and the Kazakhstan branch of the professional union of workers in culture, sports, tourism and information (www.kazakhcinema.kz).

lecturer in film history and theory of National Academy of Art, expressed her concern about art house films, which constitute socially significant films, saying:

Art film will never bring money back because it is created for a particular specialist audience. However, we shouldn't treat it like money spent in vain because these films show intellectuals and specialist audiences abroad what Kazakhstan is like as a country. There must be a separate budget for the art films as they cannot survive without the state's subsidies. How long will young filmmakers such as Adilkhan Yerzhanov and Serik Abishev be able to produce such films if they can only rely on the enthusiasm of the young? They need to be given the opportunity to develop as directors (interview, 2019).

The former head of the SCSNC, Andrey Khazbulatov, revealed that they were preparing a grading system for films to secure a certain amount of funding for every film category. As for funding itself, during the defence of the Cinema Law project in parliament in September 2018, a bid was put in for ₸7.5 billion (£13,467,000 or \$17,615,640) per year for cinema development, which was evaluated as “too much” by deputies of the *Mazhilis* (Kazakhstan, Parliamentary Debates, 2018). However, the recent pitching results from June 2020 show that only one art-house film (*Village*) out of 42 winners, managed to pick up state aid (Kazakh Cinema, 2020b).³⁵ Here, one can see how film selection is driven by the market. Art-house films are mainly produced for film festivals, where Kazakh films are more popular, where they have potential market sales and a festival history that already gives a certain level of interest for a film. That said, the SCSNC has a long way to go in fulfilling its promised aim to “sell” all genres of film, rather than tokenistically endorsing a single art-house film.

One interviewee offered yet another opinion on the advantages of state financing:

This is a tremendous help for film producers. At present, because they are investing their own money, filmmakers produce light comedies full of jokes from KVN.³⁶ If the government invested more than half of the finance, the filmmakers would pay more attention to their creative works and would shoot what they themselves have in mind. Commercial things

³⁵ Nine documentaries, two co-productions, eight feature films, five animations, 12 short films, and five debut films.

³⁶ TV comedy show KVN – *Klub Veselyh i Nahodchivyyh* (The club of cheerful and resourceful people).

would no longer be their first priority. (Zhandos Yespenbetov, freelance director, interview, 2019)

This suggests strongly that, in the past, private filmmakers invested their own funds and the only way to hit the jackpot at the box office was to shoot comedies. The overwhelming prevalence of comedies in the country is the result of low-cost production (\$150,000-300,000, or £112,700-225,400) which justifies expenses and earns money, given the small population. Statistics shows that a successful film can gross only from \$500,000 to \$1 million (£375,700 to £751,500) at the box office, and only 15-20 per cent of Kazakh films can be successful on the domestic market (Akhmetov, 2019) and those are solely comedies. With the participation of freelance producers in funding competitions, with state aid filmmakers could shift the focus towards other genres of films, such as crime, psychological and lyrical dramas, detective stories, fantasy and melodramas. However, the low box-office gross on these films means, currently, there is little chance of that happening.

4.2.3 The Expert Council: how crucial is the selection stage?

If in most countries state support for films takes different forms - direct and indirect grants (Ravid, 2018) - most of the funding schemes in the film sector originate from centralised funding using a commission-based role (Kolokytha and Sarikasis, 2018). Kazakhstan did not change the established tradition.

The members of the EC are first and foremost the gatekeepers in selecting the best projects. One of the main concerns encountered in fieldwork was how transparent the EC would be in comparison to the old system and who selects its members:

All decisions will be made by the same 10 people. After they step aside, they will simply be replaced by people close to them, so in my view very little will change. In the past Kazakhfilm's editorial board supposedly decided which film to fund, but the final result would turn out completely differently. The one recommended by the Kazakhfilm editorial board would be ignored and out of nowhere, the ministry could fund a project that the editorial board hadn't even read. (Serik Abishev, producer, interview, 2019)

This brings to light inequities in the system with respect to the decision-making process. It is reminiscent of the corrupt system that existed in the post-Soviet space, where fraudulent deals “are initiated by self-serving bureaucrats who use their power over the resources under their purview to enrich themselves and their cronies rather than work for public good” (Karklins, 2005, p.23).

Furthermore, in Kazakhstan bribery in the government sector is mainly paid out of the potential funding itself, which is described by Langseth (2006, p.11) as a “kickback” or “secret commission”. It can be assumed that those projects suddenly appearing out of the woodwork were the result of secret connections with the upper echelon - the MCS. We can see, therefore, that previous film funding has never been either transparent or fair and was riddled with corruption at the top. It seems that the government made no attempt to rein in the activity of the MCS. And, at the same time, the Kazakhfilm editorial board did not complain to the upper echelons because they relied on funding from them and were afraid of fracturing relations with them. This supports Willemen’s (2006) argument that cinema’s power is hindered by being a state institution that must stick to state-controlled frameworks. This is why the filmmaking process in Kazakhstan is not independent.

Serik Abishev’s predictions came true in the spring of 2019, when the SCSNC published the list of members of the EC (see appendix B). The list consisted of 14 people related to cinema production, exhibition, and distribution. Decree №113 of 15 March, 2019, on the establishment of the SCSNC (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019), provides no information on who selected and offered these particular people membership although, according to Andrey Khazbulatov, a former chairman of the SCSNC, it was the Ministry of Culture and Sport.

Moreover, six members on the first list worked in JSC Kazakhfilm. Therefore, it seems that these six people could safely maintain the status quo along with the old system of film selection and its concomitant corruption and unfair decision-making. This means that there would be no real change in this brand-new EC. The reasons for this choice are outlined below:

They were selected so that each of them would fulfil their function while analysing how this project can be successful at the box office. Therefore, we have Galenko and Shukenov in the list who know the market and its specifics. That has not happened before. Previously, at Kazakhfilm, they looked only at the artistic value of the project. No one thought about rental. (Andrey Khazbulatov, chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, interview, 2019)

This suggests that there were valid reasons for choosing these individuals, one being to make the board more market oriented. The advantage of such a quality-based subsidy model is that only market-worthy projects will be funded. However, the other side of the coin is that it may lead to continuous conflict between those wanting to select high-quality films from an artistic point of view and those wanting to make money at the box office. By way of example, another respondent noted that: “Distributors are business people; they just think about the money. They [the SCSNC] want them to turn on the green light and give prime time to national films. That is all” (Doskhan Zholzhaksynov, actor, member of the first Expert Council, interview, 2019). By including distributors and cinema network owners such as Vadim Galenko (Meloman company) and Bauyrzhan Shukenov (Arman cinema network), all SCSNC film funding decisions in Kazakhstan will most likely be informed by market demand from the beginning. The result of this will be that film funding competition may depend primarily on market trends.

On a more positive note, in order to avoid the above-mentioned issues, a new resolution signed by Prime Minister Askar Mamin on 17 February, 2020, amended the previous composition of the EC (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020) (see Appendix C). Seven members were excluded (Ashimov, Zholzhaksynov, Zhubandykov, Ibrayev, Kamenskii, Maemerov, and Kaiyrbekov) and substituted by eight new members, comprising 15 people instead of 14. This suggests that the evolving film policy by the SCSNC is becoming oriented towards increased “professionalisation” of the committee. Thus, for the most part, screenwriters have replenished the new line-up along with one animator.

However, in August 2019 in the newspaper *ExpressK* a member of the previous EC, the producer Akhat Ibrayev, clarified the nature of a conflict between himself and the Union of Filmmakers, represented by the director Yermek Tursunov. “[I was subject to] court hearings, anonymous threats, intrigues. For

these reasons, I was forced to leave the Expert Council, but the attacks on me did not cease even after that”, he revealed (Ibrayev, 2019). It is worth noting that Tursunov, himself, very publicly announced his departure in February 2020 via several republican newspapers, starting an information war with the new leadership of the SCSNC under Gulnara Sarsenova. Following Tursunov, the new chairman of the EC, Satybaldy Narymbetov, who had the right to two votes, and Bekbolat Shekerov both also left the Council. It may well be a struggle for the position of CEO of the SCSNC. The second reason for the war between these two sides may be that Tursunov got more opportunities for his own films from the old funding system through Kazakhfilm (\$13 million). He received £9,769,600 for four films: *Kelin (Daughter in Law)* (2009), *The Old Man* (2012), *Kenje* (2015) and *Keeper* (2018) (Zakon.kz, 2020a). In 2019, the new system through the SCSNC, decided to allocate only funds of \$1,177,800 (£885,145) for his new film, *The Choice*, whereas the director asked for more than \$1,413,000 (£1,062,000) (Zakon.kz, 2020a). Therefore, the allocation of funds may be one of the main reasons for the struggle.

According to Tursunov, the government spends annually \$450 million (£336,984,750) just to employ the 30 SCSNC employees (Beisenalieva, 2020, n.p.), which is a staggering waste of funds, as explained:

The Expert Council has an exclusively advisory voice, which in practice, if we are not careful, can ultimately become just a beautiful and comfortable shield, protecting private interests, creating behind-the-scenes bureaucratic obstacles or enabling decisions to be made by someone's 'call'. [...] Even in the midst of work and discussion, we were faced with pressure from outside. The Council should not be affiliated with anyone. Neither the Ministry of Culture nor the heads of the centre have the right to interfere in the work of the Council at all. [...] When the head of the centre [Gulnara Sarsenova] in the process of discussion is in the same room as the Expert Council and constantly passes on someone's "wishes", it outrages me.

We can see again, therefore, how decisions are often influenced by private interests. From this it is clear that, although funding has increased, and the selection process has become more transparent, old “traditions” persist.

However, these high-profile occurrences did not stop the biased process of project selection. Inner intrigues and struggle for power continue to be an issue,

where opposing parties do not wish to negotiate but cast blame on each other through articles in the media.

In terms of international experience, most countries have been using a points-based system in selecting the best film projects for funding. For instance, the BFI's cultural policy pays more attention to the cultural impact of films. Each applicant must pass 18 out of 35 marks in a cultural test. The BFI sticks to five funding priorities for applicants: talent development and progression, risk, perspective, UK-relevance, and support for films with a strong cultural impact. This latter is concerned with supporting projects that address social, political, and culturally relevant themes (www.bfi.org.uk). A very similar system was proposed in Kazakhstan by the director Rashid Nugmanov at the discussion stage of the Cinema Law. However, the proposal did not pass.

Selection criteria for qualifying as a “national” film is based on Article 14 of the Law. It states that the film is recognised as national if:

- 1) The film has achieved a high artistic level, satisfying the spiritual needs of the people, serving the public interest and gaining the recognition of the Republic of Kazakhstan through the art of cinema;
- 2) With respect to the production, distribution and display of films, at least 70 per cent of the total work on the budget is carried out by film organisations registered in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
- 3) The film is produced by a citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan and (or) a legal entity that has been registered in the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
- 4) The film's authors (i.e., scriptwriter, director, cameraman, production designer, author of a musical work) comprise at least 50 per cent of individuals who are citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Kinematografii, 2019).

According to the first criterion, it is not clear what “public interest” and “spiritual needs” stand for Kazakhstan. These notions may vary and may be very

subjective. For instance, one person may search for the meaning of life, while another may have need for faith. Also, these criteria support the argument by Elsaesser (2005, p.26) that any film company or institution wishing to be defined as national cinema is implying that it wishes to be regarded as entitled to state support. Therefore, any state-funded films, as Kazakh Cinema Law states, are national.

However, the members of the first Expert Council, which functioned between May 2019 and August 2019, had a different opinion:

I think it [the EC] should not consider only national cinema, because it narrows down the scope of cinema. Therefore, any topic, whether contemporary or about the past, needs to be considered in a broader context. (Doskhan Zholzhaksynov, actor, member of the first Expert Council, interview, 2019)

According to the Law, other commercial films (not necessarily national ones) will only have funding of up to 30 per cent. Therefore, it may seem that the Kazakh film market is threatened again by a boom in historical films, which qualify for 100 per cent funding. The result is a potential clash, given the criteria of the members of the first EC (May-August, 2019) did not fully match the four points of Article 14 of the Cinema Law.

Another aspect that emerges here is the issue of socially significant films, which will get 100 per cent funding. According to Article 1 of the Cinema Law, socially significant films are actual films, including historical ones, intended to raise the patriotic, spiritual, moral, intellectual, and cultural potential of society, including the upbringing of the younger generation: children's films, social films, animation, debut films and historical films (Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Kinematografii, 2019). For Adilkhan Yerzhanov, this point is confusing:

In other words, this is a made-to-order film. Socially significant is publicly significant, and publicly significant means that it is useful to society now. Cinema about the past is not socially significant. It is historically significant. It is not useful to society at this moment. Yes, I agree it is culturally significant, but a socially significant film, in my opinion, and the opinion of the majority, is one that answers the most crucial

questions in our current society. (Adilkhan Yerzhanov, director, interview, 2019)

Here, Yerzhanov is contradicting what the Law states about this category of films. He stresses the words "at this moment" to indicate that a movie can only be significant at the time of shooting and release but after some years it can lose its relevance.

As opposed to the point-based system offered by the director Rashid Nugmanov, the SCSNC launched a voting system based on the decision of the members of the EC. Between 30 September and 31 October, 2019, the SCSNC carefully selected 88 films out of 215 in seven categories³⁷ for the second official pitching session (see Figure 18). A total of 215³⁸ film projects in seven separate categories were considered (Kazakh Cinema, 2020b). In order to make the selection more transparent, the new leadership of the SCSNC launched a live online video broadcast to be available to anyone who wished to watch it between 27 February and 5 March, 2020. In the end, the EC recommended 58 projects to the Interdepartmental Commission and the latter decided to fund 42 films for about ₸6 billion (£10,872,600 or \$14,092,500) in 2020 and 2021 (Ibid). Although this was seen as an unprecedented number of pictures supported, the result of the selection still proved disappointing. It became clear that the EC could not do anything other than make recommendations and 16 of these films (18 per cent) ultimately were rejected. Indeed, Article 13 of the Decree in addition to the Cinema Law states: "Decisions of the Council are drawn up in the form of a protocol, which is advisory in nature" (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). Therefore, the decision of the EC has no real power, leading one to question how big a difference the new Cinema Law is going to make on the ground.

³⁷ Feature films (66), debut films (38), documentary (34), short films (30), animation (19), international co-production (15), and art house films (13).

³⁸ This number differs from 215 to 223 at the website of SCSNC www.kazakhcinema.kz.



Figure 18 Members of the new EC and the head staff of the SCSNC voting for projects on 22 January, 2020, to be selected for a pitching session. www.kazakhcinema.kz.

There is evidence that transparency of the selection process is being undermined. At the meeting of filmmakers in Almaty in January 2020, the head of the SCSNC Gulnara Sarsenova let slip the fact that: “Filmmakers and those who previously led Kazakhfilm know that there is still ‘telephone lobbying’ for projects. When they call and ask to promote a specific project, I can afford to refuse some callers, but not always” (Amanov, 2020). This argument supports what Yermek Tursunov stated above about ongoing interference in the EC’s work. Was this an acceptance of the fact that lobbying for projects has its place, or an admission of the inherent bias in decisions? Either way, it brings into question the fairness of the system. It raises the question of which calls could Sarsenova not refuse? The answer is probably calls from people who hold positions in the upper echelon.

Besides the EC, the SCSNC has a Board of Directors, consisting of five people. Among them is Parliament Deputy Bekbolat Tileukhan, who previously acted in *Myn Bala: Warriors of the Steppe* (2012) in the role of the great Kazakh narrator and poet, Bukhar Zhyrau, and, in *The Kazakh Khanate: The Diamond Sword*

(2016), as the ancient Kazakh poet and narrator Kaztugan (see Figure 19). For Tileukhan, who is famous for his criticism of contemporary Kazakh films, a truly Kazakh national film should achieve the following:

We must praise our positive side and conceal the negative. I don't agree with revealing truths that may offend the nation. Our filmmakers must show the bravery and nobility of the Kazakh nation, not how it is used to screen the country's shame and shadowy past. It is not acceptable to present the history of civilised Kazakhstan as if we were African tribes. (Bekbolat Tileukhan, Parliament deputy, interview, 2019)



Figure 19 Parliament Deputy Bekbolat Tileukhan acting in the historical film *The Kazakh Khanate: The Diamond Sword*, 2016. www.inform.kz.

It is worth noting that the film *Kelin (Daughter in Law)* (2009) by Yermek Tursunov has been criticised by Kazakh society and Tileukhan, in particular. The film, to his mind, showed scenes that were too intimate and positioned the Kazakh daughter-in-law's image in conflict with an authentic Kazakh identity, despite the script being set around the third century AD, in the pre-Islamic period when Kazakhs as a nation did not exist. However, this film was well reviewed by *The Hollywood Reporter* as "it heralds the arrival of a new director from a virtually unknown part of the world, who is capable of marrying high

production values with innovative storytelling and a surprisingly modern feel” (Senjanovic, 2009). This emphasis on production values tallies with the concept of quality embodied in criterion 1 of the new Cinema Law (recognition of the Republic of Kazakhstan through the art of cinema). However, the review foregrounds the mismatch between the positive perception of some Kazakh films by the Western media versus a lack of appreciation by officials, who are among the leadership of the SCSNC as well as helping to point to a new direction removed from the too-narrow vision of film art, whereby nationalistic views have prevailed.

4.3 Issues in the distribution system

It is broadly recognised that the distribution system is a vital link that connects filmmakers with audiences throughout the whole cinema field. For people outside of it, distribution is understood as merely a physical way of transferring film to cinema theatres (Knight and Thomas, 2011). However, Kazakhstan’s case is more complicated.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, a number of countries in it faced similar challenges as a result of a crisis in cinema. One parallel example is Bulgaria, an almost identical case to Kazakhstan, where the vertically integrated film industry, with its centralised financing, did not aim to make a profit out of film. Although Bulgaria is a rather small nation, the transitional period occurred there earlier than in Kazakhstan as, in 1991, the country launched an alternative to centralised film production, shifting funding power to a National Film Centre before adopting a Film Industry Act in 2003. Similarly, the new centre served as an administrative body fully controlled by the Ministry of Culture to manage production, distribution and exhibition. However, the older generation of filmmakers was not prepared to adopt new funding rules. The situation was aggravated by the distribution network rapidly disintegrating and being replaced by subsidiaries controlled by Western companies loyal to Hollywood films. Local Bulgarian films were simply not able to serve the needs of the domestic audience and this hopeless situation impacted on the nation’s cultural memory (Iordanova, 2007). Most of these challenges were also faced by Kazakhstan.

A problem with the rental movie theatres started in Kazakhstan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union when Kazakh cinema got into hot water, as this interviewee explains:

In the 1990s, the connection between Kazakh cinema and its audience became fractured. The audience became influenced by foreign ideology. There is a big gap between the values of the older and younger generation. Everything has to have a national code. Each nation has its own characteristics. Our directors are short of these things. They cannot grasp the notion of roots. They cannot work out where they are. (Baubek Nogerbek, associate professor, doctor in film history and theory of the National Academy of Art, interview, 2019)

Indeed, filmmakers did not worry about the future destiny of their films. After approval by Goskino,³⁹ their pieces of art were circulated across the territory of the Soviet Union. This is the way Soviet films always used to make their revenue. In addition, the USSR regulated cinema theatres with a requirement of at least 30 per cent of Soviet films being on screens. For Western films it was difficult to reach the Soviet viewership (Rakhmankyzy, 2017). They took their lead from one of the few states in the world that could control internal cinema rental, namely Norway. The Municipal Films Centre, established in 1919 in Norway, was set up in response to a system of private distribution whereby local theatres took 90 per cent of all box office income. The Soviet system was described as “the only one comparable [to Norway’s] powerful public exhibition system” (Harris, 2018, p.237). Kazakhstan’s problem was that although it had something comparable in Soviet times, it was unable to inherit the system after independence. Additionally, nowadays, market trends have changed and have had a tremendous influence on movie rental. The main problem is that in Soviet times everything was centralised - not only the creation of the film but also its distribution. Now it is a commercial market in Kazakhstan that dictates the rules. Rashid Nugmanov explained:

Now all cinema networks without exception are 100 per cent privately owned. Moreover, it is impossible to force them to screen films in an orderly manner and to make film schedules on behalf of them. Their main activity is profit-making. Therefore, they only show the films which viewers will go to. (Rashid Nugmanov, director, interview, 2019)

³⁹ Goskino was founded in 1972 with its own four-point system of categorisation: third, second, first and the highest. The higher the category of the film, the larger was the circulation.

First, such a stance is very plainly an anti-market view of what audiences should see. Here, it is not the audience but the cinema theatres that choose. Relying on previous experience, cinema theatres filter potentially successful films for the market and for audiences. The general deficit of national film exhibition supports Abikeyeva's (2001) view that the government's exhibition and broadcasting policy in the country does not aim at some kind of promotion biased towards domestic cinema by giving it preference. However, it allows personality cult movies about Nazarbayev (see section 1.2) to circulate freely. There were some incidents when civil servants were forced to go to cinema theatres to watch the biopic film (Lahanuly, 2014). This example shows that the green light is given to *Akorda*-centric (White House) films, in other words, made-to-order films.

In Kazakhstan, films are distributed via six companies (see Table 1).

Table 1 Top 6 distributors in Kazakhstan in 2017 (Leontyeva and Kuzmichev, 2018).

	Distributor	Films	Releases	The number of attendances ⁴⁰	Box office gross (\$)
1	Sulpak	81	71	6,233,100	15,372
2	Meloman ⁴¹	156	136	5,303,300	12,530
3	20 th Century Fox Kazakhstan	14	14	1,852,000	4,530
4	Good cinema (Prof.Solution Group) ⁴²	30	28	844,500	2,100
5	Vol'ga	25	25	270,100	570
6	Paradise	22	22	228,400	630

As can be seen from the table above, the leading players in the film distribution market are the four representatives of the six major studios. The first one,

⁴⁰ This column illustrates how many people attended the films in 2017.

⁴¹ Meloman is the Kazakhstani company that first distributed the Kazakh commercial film *Loving Heart or Cocktail for a Star* in 2010, which grossed \$1 million (Anna Darmodekhina, PR officer of Meloman, interview, 2019).

⁴² The legal entity of this brand is Prof Solution Group/Paramount and the rest of the package is Central Partnership (Leontyeva and Kuzmichev, 2018).

Sulpak, is a Kazakhstani brand of Interfilm Distribution located in Ukraine,⁴³ and is responsible for UPI and Warner Bros. Meloman includes films by Walt Disney and Columbia/Sony. In third place is 20th Century Fox Kazakhstan (Leontyeva and Kuzmichev, 2018). Since March 2020, the entire package of films by 20th Century Studios transferred from Twentieth Century Fox CIS, based in Russia, to Kazakhstani Meloman (Chachelov and Bashinskaya, 2020).⁴⁴ Independent Russian distribution companies lying fifth and sixth, such as Vol'ga and Paradise, work directly in Kazakhstan (Leontyeva and Kuzmichev, 2018). It is not hard to notice that Kazakhstan has only one distribution company of its own - Meloman. Hence, Russian and Western studios prevail in the Kazakhstani market, owning more than half of the distribution funds. According to Lobato (2012, p.2), "the distributor plays a crucial role in film culture - it determines what films we see, and when and how we see them, and it also determines what films we do not see". Therefore, the Kazakh cinema market is controlled by foreign companies operating via the Russian market. Hence, national Kazakh films have very little chance of winning this battle against Western films.

Another respondent reinforced the view that cinema networks do want to support Kazakh cinema, as market rules dominate:

We need to get rid of foreign cinema in order to develop Kazakh cinema. Now Russian films have invaded even 10 per cent more than they did in the past. Now the heads of cinema theatres do think about screening Kazakh cinema, but earning money is their first concern. In such circumstances Kazakh cinema often loses its novelty and topicality. After watching Russian films, Kazakh films lose their appeal. It is pure psychology. (Anonymous interviewee, 2019)

This statement implies that Kazakh films are very thin on the ground in cinema circuits and underpins the argument of the next interviewee, who said: "We schedule Hollywood films first. And then we give the remaining slots to other films, including Kazakhstani films" (Anna Darmodekhina, press officer of Meloman, interview, 2019). Additionally, my anonymous informant's idea of getting rid of foreign cinema is directly opposed to perfect competition theory in

⁴³ The head office in Kyiv operates in nine former Soviet Union states: Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (<http://www.interfilm.com.ua/>).

⁴⁴ Since March 2020, Disney has been engaged in rental of 20th Century Studios in the CIS while Meloman is a distributor of Disney in Kazakhstan.

economics. However, recent research shows that Kazakh films could compete with foreign ones and were ranked third and fifth in the top five films exhibited in 2018 in the local market (Leontyeva et al, 2019). Moreover, in 2020, the comedy *The Kazakh Business in Korea* (2019) grossed ₸1,139,314,940 (over £2,317,000 or \$2,675,970) in 45 days of theatrical screenings. Each episode of this comedy tells of the adventures of a businessman and his relatives in different countries like the USA, Kenya and Korea. The fourth part of the franchise set a new record and became the first Kazakhstani film to earn over ₸1 billion in the domestic box office, bypassing the Marvel blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* in Kazakhstan (Kapital, 2020). However, to win the battle against Western films, Kazakh filmmakers have to continue producing comedies. Only comedy can reach high rankings, whereas other genres still stay in the shadows. Furthermore, in 2019, the number of national releases in distribution was only 44 out of a total of 374 (Kazakh Cinema, 2020a), which is less than 12 per cent, almost the same as a decade ago. In 2008, at screenings including film festivals, the proportion of Kazakh films reached 10 per cent, with 90 per cent being foreign (Beumers, 2010).

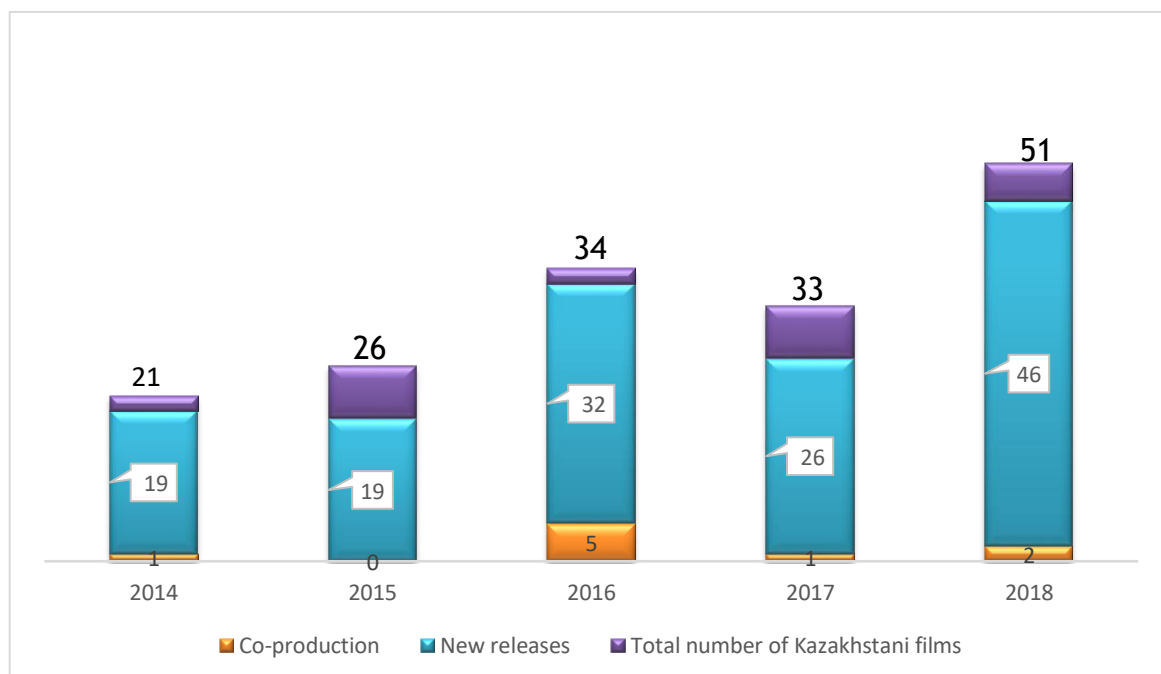


Figure 20 The number of national films at cinema theatres in Kazakhstan (Leontyeva et al, 2019).

After a slight decline in the production of national films in 2017, Kazakhstani filmmakers in 2018 managed to catch up and released a record number of 46

new films, including two co-productions with France and Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 20). However, only 20 per cent of cinema-goers have watched them (Leontyeva et al, 2019). This fact contradicts the idea of “cultural difference” by Bhabha (see section 2.1). If this idea can be reached through a viewership interested in the nation’s cultural status, then the small audience would suggest that the power of national film is insignificant in Kazakhstan. Also, as a form of expression and representation of the nation, Kazakh films cannot fulfill their function in full force.

One more example is the audience’s interests. Adilkhan Yerzhanov says: “Our film, *The Gentle Indifference of the World*, was in Kazakhstan’s cinema theatres, but it had limited rental. It went badly. However, in France, it gathered about 30,000 spectators, bringing in about €200,000 [\$238,893 or £179,000] so it paid for itself. Also, in Kazakhstan, there were only about 200 or even 150 spectators” (Adilkhan Yerzhanov, director, interview, 2019). This highlights that viewers’ interest and choice play a vital and undeniable role in building box-office revenue. Secondly, it suggests that art-house films such as this may be more popular abroad rather than in Kazakhstan.

It should also be noted that, these days, the two central cities, Almaty and Nur-Sultan, make the majority of income, with 60 per cent of attendances and box office revenue (Leontyeva et al, 2019). This leaves the rural areas in the worst situation. As the head of the Cinema Rental and Marketing Department of Kazakhfilm studio, Gulzat Shurenova-Kalischuk, pointed out: “In the regions, we work with the Departments of Culture of the local city administration. They make a contract with us. This way, they screen films in special concert halls in small towns and villages - Houses of Culture - in DVD and AVI formats. Our films are shown all over Kazakhstan.” However, if you consider the fact that only 13 per cent of people in settlements with less than 100,000 inhabitants have access to cinemas (Leontyeva et al, 2019), the system does not cover small villages.

The distribution side may seem to be the one most influenced by the new rules of the digital market. Theatrical exhibition, in particular, is being forced to readapt itself to the growth of the Internet and the subversive process of digitisation (Pardo, 2015). However, in Kazakhstan digitisation of film distribution and exhibition also depends on the level of internet capacity:

We are not so good with the Internet, despite the reports of our government. We are still working with hard drives. Not a single cinema theatre has enough Internet power to upload a movie to a server with a good quality. (Anna Darmodekhina, Press officer of Meloman, interview, 2019)

Meloman still circulates films by post to small towns as the Internet capacity is not capable of sending the content online. This internet issue significantly slows down the circulation of films. Moreover, when the country has uprisings and riots against the government, as happened in 2019 after the presidential election, the Internet may be shut down for several days.

To sum up, it can be said that the main problem is disunity in Kazakhstan's cinema market. There is no Kazakh cinema distribution institute (Vlasenko, 2018). Whereas in Western countries the distributor can enter the project at the script-writing stage and buy into the whole project for distribution at the beginning, in Kazakhstan this takes place only at the end.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed my first research question: Who takes the decisions in Kazakh cinema market and who controls it?

This chapter described Kazakh cinema's transition from the monopolistic Kazakhfilm studio system to the centralised state operator of film policy - the SCSNC. The recent announcement by the Minister of Culture and Sport, Aktoty Raiymkulova (July 2020), on the future mutual decision-making by the SCSNC and JSC Kazakhfilm studio has been shown to undermine the ultimate goal of the Cinema Law, which was to get rid of the previous monopolistic system of funding. Thus, the film policy itself has inner problems that impede a meaningful influence on nation building.

If the state's cultural policy, according to Higson (1989, p.44) is the way the nation "seeks to differentiate itself from others", then the unique features of Kazakhstan's cinema institute is incompatible with world standards of film industry development. This chapter has argued that corruption and bribery have been, and still are, the reason for the stalled or very slowly developing film

industry. The post-Soviet system, corrupted from above, does not allow Kazakh cinema to be independent and, therefore, competitive within the country or abroad. Until the system and its values change, it makes no sense to expect that the millions allocated for the development of cinema will reach their destination. The state, represented by the MCS, makes final decisions by tightly controlling the industry through the recently established SCSNC and strongly influences the policy of films (how and what to shoot). Here, one can see the influence of the mixture of political and economic power.

This said, the SCSNC is offering a new model of selection and pitching sessions, which makes the funding system more transparent, although currently it is still held back by obstacles similar to the past.

It can be predicted that socially significant films (historical films, debut films, children's films, social films, and animation) determined by the Cinema Law will prevail over other genres because of 100 per cent state aid. Moreover, intrigues incessantly occurring between filmmakers who are blaming each other in the media do not allow the industry to expand.

Secondly, the distribution market, including the cinema research market, does not belong to Kazakhstan. Previously, Kazakhfilm, as the primary possessor of state-owned films, could not address distribution opportunities for Kazakh cinema. One reason for this is that the country is completely dependent on the Russian stream of information. The distributor-centric model in Kazakhstan, where the lion's share is taken by Western companies, is used throughout Russia. The system itself resembles the former Soviet Union, where all important decisions were made in Moscow. Kazakh films in some places create a worthy competitor to Western and Russian films, being ahead at the box office - but these are currently mainly films of the comedy genre. Distributors, therefore, will not accept films of other genres for fear of rejection, because the country has only 200,000 active cinema-goers. As a result, it can be said that the SCSNC may have to pay cinema theatres to screen national films in order to justify its own existence, which is an additional burden on the state budget. If local films were able to access a wider theatrical exhibition circuit (as personality cult films do), it could have helped to build a more diverse film culture among the population.

This study is not limited to exploring cinema production. A film festival is a platform for film culture and is another dimension to measure the impact of that film culture on shaping the country's image. The next chapter centres on the case of the EurIFF, where I will explore how significant its impact is for nation building, given it is the biggest and the oldest film festival in Kazakhstan.

5 An examination of the EurIFF

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the past and present conditions of the film industry in Kazakhstan, focusing in particular on the new funding model within the Cinema Law (2019). The other way to examine the construction of a “film identity” as well as film culture is to focus specifically on a film festival, given they are considered a “useful means of building a city’s image and fostering its attractiveness” (Grunwell and Steve, 2008, n.p.) as well as useful for developing a country’s image. As was stated previously (see section 2.1), a nation may be represented by a city. The city is a constructor of the nation (Therborn, 2006). The city can “merge into the nation-building agenda of the state” (Leerssen, 2015, p.15). Therefore, the role of the city in the nation-building process is crucial.

This chapter seeks to answer the second research question: To what extent does EurIFF contribute to nation building and projection of the nation? It is the aim of this chapter to highlight how the Kazakh film festival differs from traditional European models. Section 1 extends the narrative of the history and escalation of the EurIFF as the first international film festival event through the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s. Identifying the EurIFF as an alternative form of film exhibition, its influence on Kazakhstan's identity is explored in Section 2. In the third section I also look at the different challenges that shape today’s image of the festival.

5.1 The history of the festival movement in Kazakhstan

Numerous festivals have been run in the East and the West all year round, but each one is distinct (Iordanova, 2009). No one can estimate the real number because many festivals are not tracked (Turan, 2002), however, a decade ago the estimated figure of international film festivals was around 3,500 world-wide (Peterson and Ooi, 2010 p.322). Whether to develop film culture or to make money from the industry, film festivals have always been crucial.

If we look at the Cold War era, film festivals such as Moscow, Karlovy Vary, Havana and Tashkent were under the influence of the Soviet sphere, working independently and differently from those in the West (Iordanova, 2009). This meant that, before independence, Kazakhstan's film culture co-existed with the Soviet Union and had to compete with other Soviet nations to connect with the world outside the Iron Curtain. Most Kazakh films circulated only within the USSR and could only reach the market of other socialist countries if they were lucky. Individual auteurs in the USSR did not have an opportunity to advertise their films. As a result, the number of independent cinemas was limited. Only the Karlovy Vary and Moscow film festivals were considered important film events in communist countries (Cudny and Przybylska, 2018). Thus, the colonial system did not allow Soviet countries to compete internationally.

Film festivals became established in Asia as a form of cultural practice in the mid-1970s (Teo, 2009). However, the Central Asian region did not participate in independent film events. This was because the country was not an independent state. Kazakhstan, along with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan had no simple means of holding large-scale events. If we speak about film festival culture, it arrived in Kazakhstan in the late 1980s. Small-scale film events such as Kazakh film weeks and Kazakh cinema days frequently took place in Kazakhstan and outside the country as well. Yet it was not until 1998 that Almaty, the former capital, pioneered its first film festival.

Whereas in the West film culture developed fast, starting with the Festival de Cannes, which has remained one of the top A-list festivals (Ostrowska, 2016), film festivals in Kazakhstan are small-scale affairs, sharing little interaction or comparison with one another. The majority have different aims and objectives. For example, the Shaken Aimanov festival is unique in that it is Turkic cinema's only international film event in the world. The Bastau and Ushkyn events are student festivals for debut films. The Baiqonyr International Short Film Festival is an important event for filmmakers from Central Asia and is the largest short film festival in the post-Soviet space (Kazakh cinema, 2020a). Of all these, the oldest and most established annual film event is the EurIFF.

5.1.1 The 15th Eurasia International Film Festival

The EurIFF takes its name from the concept of Eurasianism. The name was first announced in 1994 by then president Nursultan Nazarbayev at Moscow state university and the idea behind this concept was an intention to build “solidarity and peace among people who belong to different ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds”. This concept became the root principle of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy strategy, promoted by the authorities after their launch of the new multilateral organisation, *Evrasiiskii Soyuz* (Eurasian Union) (Anceschi, 2020) (see section 2.3). A key slogan, the “Heart of Eurasia”, was used at promotional events, thus attempting to place Kazakhstan in the middle of the Eurasian continent both geographically and culturally. The slogan was created after the publication of Nazarbayev’s *In the Heart of Eurasia* in 2006. The book is dedicated to the formation of the new capital, Astana. The idea of Eurasianism lay at the heart of events such as the Asian Winter Games in 2011, and the organisation of the OSCE Summit in 2010 (Waśkiel, 2019). One can see a similar attempt made with the annual EurIFF.

The launch of the 1st EurIFF in 1998 offered the largest ever film forum in the territory of Kazakhstan, the Baltic countries, and Central Asia as a whole (EurIFF, 2018a). However, the gaps between 1999-2005 and 2009, when the state did not hold the festival, marked a gradual decline. Only in 2010 did the event become active again (see Figure 21). Since its relocation from Almaty city to the capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) in 2017, the southern capital has launched a separate Almaty Film Festival headed by the director Akan Satayev, which is also international and supported by Almaty’s local administration. However, due to the fact that it has only been in existence for three years, the new Almaty festival has not yet managed to build on the city’s earlier well-known countrywide credentials.

The EurIFF itself is relatively young compared to its A-list counterparts. However, the Copenhagen International Film Festival (CIFF) and the Festa del Cinema di Roma (FCR), launched later (in 2003 and 2006, respectively) in Denmark and Italy, are bright examples of two cities trying to put themselves on the global map of film festivals (Pedersen and Mazza, 2011, p.140). This suggests

that the age of the EurIFF may not make much difference when it comes to its popularity and it may still enrich film culture.



Figure 21 French actor Gérard Depardieu at the 10th EurIFF in 2010 in Almaty.
https://brod.kz/news/vspominaya_evraziyu/.

The success of the festival, to a large extent, depends on the organisational process. Prominent figures such as the director Rashid Nugmanov and film critic Gulnara Abikeyeva organised the EurIFF at different times. The latter acted as the EurIFF art director for a total of 10 years, heading the festival from 2005 to 2013. He said:

We had three categories of people. First of all, there were selectors. There are only about 10 of them in the world. Then the pool of about 30 foreign journalists from different countries. Finally, 20 film experts, 60 people in all, a large group of film professionals. We focused on the range of expertise required to make film professionals think, write, and reflect on Kazakh cinema. (Gulnara Abikeyeva, President of the Association of Film Critics of Kazakhstan, interview, 2019)

Abikeyeva indicates here that the festival team did a lot to make Kazakhstan recognisable through mass media and becoming a platform for selectors. Since that time, the EurIFF has proved that it has great resources for building international relations, although it was not able to become a real business platform. If we compare it with its counterparts in Europe - the Copenhagen International Film Festival (CIFF) and the Festa del Cinema di Roma (FCR) - local city administration, government, tourism agencies and film industry

organisations were involved and interested in creating these events (Pederson and Mazza, 2011). It was almost the same with the EurlIFF, although this was created more by filmmakers' sheer enthusiasm along with government support. Non-involvement of tourism agencies at the beginning shows that the country did not aim to make revenue from the festival but was more interested in popularising Kazakh cinema for an invited international audience and the local audience of the host city. On the other hand, Kazakhstan's culture of internal/indigenous tourism was not so developed at the end of the 1990s. But, this was not the festival's only significance.

5.2 The festival's reputation and how it is perceived

With respect to the EurlIFF's reputation one should note the following: it is the oldest one in independent Kazakhstan; within the CIS space, it comes second only to the A-listed Moscow Film Festival accredited by the International Federation of Film Producers' Associations (henceforth, FIAPF), the only self-appointed international film festival regulator; and it has been given specialised competitive status among all post-Soviet states (FIAPF, 2019).

In 2006, the EurlIFF applied for endorsement as a specialised competitive festival by the FIAPF, which was founded in 1933. In contrast to this, many festivals, such as Toronto, Sundance, and Rotterdam, avoid applying for FIAPF support because they are able to, and so prefer to secure their own supply chain (Iordanova, 2009). International film events, in order to get quality films for their competition programmes, were under the authority of the FIAPF. By the middle of the 1950s, 21 production companies comprised the Europe-based FIAPF (Fehrenbach, 2019). This organisation started to interfere and control the chain of major festivals. What is more, many criticised the FIAPF for its restrictive rulings based on short-term decisions related to location when accrediting films (Iordanova, 2009, p.27). Even the FIAPF's Edinburgh Film Festival programmer, Mark Cousins, called the A-list "pointless" because some of those listed in the group were inferior to Sundance, Toronto, London, or Rotterdam (Ibid, p.155). Even so, EurlIFF officials are very proud of being accredited by the FIAPF and consider this a sound and prestigious success.

International recognition by the FIAPF has signalled the growing maturity of the festival. Compared to the Melbourne Film festival in Australia, where the desire for FIAPF endorsement was motivated by gaining “access to those international films that were only available to FIAPF accredited events” (Stevens, 2016, p.35), the EurIFF just sought international acclaim and to equal itself with counterparts all over the world. On the other hand, the EurIFF’s recognition by the FIAPF was predictable because the organisation recognised only one film festival in each country regardless of its size (Ibid, 2016) and the EurIFF was the biggest and most influential in Kazakhstan. Sanctioning by the FIAPF builds an expectation that the festival “represents recognised operational accountability. [...] It represents to participants the expectation of a known and approved quality of interaction” (Fischer, 2013, p.82). Moreover, the EurIFF’s accreditation both by the NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) and FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Producers’ Associations) organisations has established the festival’s legitimacy in film culture. Film festival membership within external organisations establishes them as a favoured site of exhibition to visitors (Ibid), thus giving the event credibility.

Further recognition has been gained via the *International Film Guide*, which was last published in the UK in 2012 (Smith, 2012), when it included the EurIFF in its list of the leading 73 international film festivals⁴⁵ along with Abu Dhabi, Berlin, Busan, Cairo, Cannes, and other film festivals.

In recent years, the festival focused on films from Central Asia and the Turkic world, but this year the remit was broadened to encompass films from Europe, Asia, and the CIS countries. (Ibid, p.279)

Smith underlines that the EurIFF’s coverage broadened only in 2012. It can be suggested that the Shaken Aimanov festival took over Turkic world cinema from the EurIFF in 2012, so the latter could switch its attention to the rest of the world.

⁴⁵ However, the festival directorate had the wrong information about it and kept informing the readers through the festival website (<https://eiff.kz/eng/home/festivali/>) that the *International Film Guide* included the EurIFF as one of the 35 leading festivals of the world in 2012.

Since its inception, the EurIFF has seen its primary duty as catering for both local and global audiences. The programmes, round-tables and master classes involved the participation of film critics, experts, journalists of *Variety* and *Sight and Sound*. Back in 2006, James Bell, the editor of the *Sight and Sound* international film magazine of the British Film Institute, when invited to the third EurIFF, recalls the festival as “a little post-Soviet, a little Asian, a little European” (Bell, 2006, n.p.). Although 13 years have passed since this observation was made, many things have not been changed. It still lacks a strong sense of its individuality and, in fact, quite to the contrary, presents itself as a modern, global festival. The event has thus branded Kazakhstan as having a somewhat mixed identity. This suggests that the extent of the festival’s contribution to nation building depends on the internal national identity of Kazakhstan.

The main difference that was observed at the anniversary festival in 2019 was that, for the first time, the event began to work closely with the Union of Filmmakers of Kazakhstan.

If before many filmmakers considered themselves to be guests, from this year onwards, the Union of Filmmakers is wholly engaged with the organisation of the entire competitive programme and the selection of guests. We plan that, from now on, the SCSNC will work throughout the year on the creation of a future film festival which collaborates closely with other film festivals. (Andrey Khazbulatov, Chairman of the Board of SCSNC, interview, 2019)

Before 2019, the EurIFF had to deal with the tendering system, which meant any organisation could participate, offer the lowest price, and win the tender. As a result, the festival had new organisers every year and was unable to develop because each new group of organisers had to start from scratch and therefore could not benefit from the experience and the feedback of previous promoters. Rashid Nugmanov, who worked as a general director of the festival between 2015 and 2017, points out:

The tender practice is not suitable for festivals. We really need to abolish it. Each year, no one knows who is going to be in charge. What it needs is a permanent, fixed office throughout the year. There are always requests from new filmmakers around the world on how to submit a film. Inquiries also come from new festivals wanting to be partners and participate in exchange programmes. So, it is not helpful that it has to start afresh

every year, and is simply wasting money. (Rashid Nugmanov, director, interview, 2019)

Further empirical evidence from this research demonstrates many examples of basic mismanagement. The state treats the festival as a one-week event of the year with no understanding of how it should fit into best practice world-wide. It is also clear from researching current and previous websites of the EurIFF (www.eurasiaiff.com in 2017, www.eurasiafestival.kz in 2018 and www.eiff.com in 2019) and the completely different Eurasian Film Festival in London (www.eurasianfilmfestival.uk) that readers and audiences were confused and repeatedly misled by incorrect contact details. Moreover, the abbreviation EIFF, which the festival used in 2019, is the same as the famous Edinburgh International Film Festival. Those interested in the Kazakh festival are not aware of these internal organisational pitfalls. Such errors inevitably leave a negative impression of the event.

With specific reference to the tender system, it took until 2019 for the Union of Filmmakers of the RK to insist that the ministry and the SCSNC should organise the event more efficiently on a long-term basis.

Previously, this festival was like a ball. Any institution could win a tender to organise the festival: today a violinist, tomorrow a pianist, the day after tomorrow, a drummer. [...] It is not about money; it is about attitude. Only a compassionate organisation should be allowed to do it. We said, "Give us how much you can give. Who is more eligible if not The Union of Filmmakers?" It is our work. We have put our lives into Kazakh cinema. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

Torebay made abundantly clear his view that the tender system, organised by the MCS, was not beneficial for the development of the festival. He (see Figure 22) described Aiman Mussakhajayeva, the president of the 14th EurIFF in 2018, as a "violinist"; Mussakhajayeva is now the head of the Kazakh National University of Arts in Nur-Sultan. He further makes clear that the Kazakh film festival industry no longer tolerates leadership from outwith the cinema circuit. This said, though this was a distinctive feature of the EurIFF before 2019, it was not, in general, so for film festivals. Also, one can argue that the tensions between "commerce and creativity" (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p.33) are observed and the division of cultural labour depends on the tender system.



Figure 22 Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF. Nur-Sultan, 3 July, 2019. www.eiff.kz.

Kazakhstan has three main aims for holding the festival:

The concept is to promote Kazakh cinema. Filmmakers from several countries come here, and we can show them our cinema. They then go out and spread the word about us. Secondly, we want to compare ourselves with what is going on in the world, with what kinds of films are being produced, given cinema is constantly evolving. Pure art, pure cinema can only be seen at festivals. The third issue is interaction. Given the number of participants, it gives us the opportunity to establish new friendships. They influence us, and we them, resulting in several projects and new ideas. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

Bearing in mind that most of the festivals aim at self-promotion, Torebay is suggesting that there is no fundamental difference between the purposes of the EurIFF and other events in the world. Probably, its main feature, along with all festivals, is this mutual influence. In this regard, the EurIFF is situating itself in relation to “others” at the same time as it distinguishes itself from “others”. Such a view reflects the analysis of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the code of cultural difference discussed earlier (see section 2.1). In this respect, the EurIFF, as a constructor of national identity and integral part of culture, has the

means to influence cinematic nation building, provided there are no obstacles placed in its way.

5.3 Challenges

Any event, not just film festivals, can have certain challenges. The former director of the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema (BAFICI), Eduardo Quintín, recalled how challenging it was to organise the event during Argentina's economic crash in 2002. Although even cash machines did not work and there was no funding, the festival still survived. This was achieved because cinephiles organised financial support campaigns and many people paid their own travel costs (Antin, 2009). The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 across the world ruined the plans of many film festivals, including Cannes. The way they got around this was by switching to online platforms. Similarly, the EurIFF (which was not held in 2020 due to coronavirus measures) witnessed both financial and other no less curious challenges in 2019.

5.3.1 Announcing the dates

Timing is one of the first things to consider in conducting film festivals (Fischer, 2013). Since its inception, the EurIFF has always been a one-week festival. Over the last three years, the festival organisers moved its presentation from the usual September slot to mid-summer, simply because 6 July is the capital's main holiday. This holiday itself was moved from 10 June to 6 July in 2006 to coincide with the birthday of President Nazarbayev, which speaks to his personality cult (see section 1.2). It is no surprise that the government moved the dates of the event to July with no consultation. If Fauve (2015, p.111) treats the nation branding of Kazakhstan "as one of the communication strategies employed by the Nazarbayev regime", moving the dates of the festival to Nazarbayev's birthday also communicates quite clearly that the country's cultural policy is dictated by the regime's authoritarian power.

What is more, many A-list festivals (Venice, San Sebastian, Warsaw, Tokyo, and Cairo) usually take place in autumn to increase tourism (Grunwell and Steve, 2008, p.2). Clearly, it is beneficial to the EurIFF if they are able to plan their

dates similarly in order to benefit from the tourist season in summer in order to attract more people to the festival.



Figure 23 From left to right: Chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, Andrey Khazbulatov, President of the EurIFF, Yermek Tursunov, programme director Eleonora Granata and Director of the Department of Culture and Art of the MCS, Abil Zholamanov. Photo taken by the author.

In 2019, the festival started on 29 June with a press conference at 11pm (see Figure 23). Although the dates of the EurIFF were announced just one month before the start,⁴⁶ the representative of the MCS did not think it was too late:

Maybe it was delayed because of the creation of the SCSNC. Nevertheless, despite those financial circumstances, these people [the organisers] were negotiating in advance with all cinema professionals worldwide. So, I don't think it was late. (Abil Zholamanov, Director of the Department of Culture and Arts, Ministry of Culture and Sport, press-conference interview, 2019)

These comments imply a limited understanding by the government of how the late allocation of funds can cause circumstances that significantly affect festival planning. It also reveals its “do-it-yourself” approach and shows the event to be

⁴⁶ In 2019, the EurIFF announced the dates of the event rather late. In spite of my repeatedly contacting the organisers via an official letter through MCS and telephone calls from November 2018 onwards, I did not get a straight answer until 24 May, 2019.

driven top-down. Despite the late fiscal organisation, the dates were not pushed by the state. However, according to EurIFF officials, politics was the main reason for the short notice:

Just politics. There is no other reason. In February, the government resigned. Then, one month later, our president resigned. Then presidential elections. Probably more attention has been paid to these factors. Nobody thought about the festival at that time. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

This makes plain that the destiny of many festivals is driven by many factors outside organisers' control such as: changes in government policy, economic crashes and technological changes (Porton, 2009). Another example is the Hong-Kong Film Festival where political and economic circumstances (bird flu, crash in the stock market, unemployment) contributed to dent its overall image after 1997 (Teo, 2009). If, in the past, the EurIFF had been faced mainly with financial problems, this time, its problems were exacerbated by political factors.

Slambek Tauekel, the creator of the EurIFF, who wrote its regulations and became the first programme director, argued that:

There should be a regular Festival Directorate as is generally the case at international festivals. At the moment they just announce the festival dates in a rush just one month ahead. How are they going to get anyone to come? (Slambek Tauekel, director, interview, 2019)

Clearly, not enough effort is put into familiarising the audience with festival dates and general planning in advance. Following the argument that high-profile international festivals have traditionally been known for fixed annual dates (de Valck, 2007) then it is obvious that, if the EurIFF aims to achieve A-list festival status, the state needs to follow global trends in organising a large-scale international film event. The EurIFF failed to establish a timing strategy which schedules a festival at a specified time of the year to ensure stable finances and predictability (Fischer, 2013). By the same token, the late announcement of the dates affects the international image of the event and does not inspire confidence that it is a credible festival despite its FIAPF accreditation. It is worth noting, also, that they have not been under pressure to establish such a timing strategy as exists in some other countries. This is because the EurIFF does not have any parallel circuit within Kazakhstan (except the new Almaty Film

Festival), unlike Montreal and Toronto in Canada, which “maintain a parallel co-existence” (Iordanova, 2009, p.30). This means the EurIFF does not have any rival competition or overlap in terms of dates.

However, the SCSNC explained that the only reason for the event starting late was funding:

It is all connected with financing, with approval. We revised various schedules and plans. We also had to work hard to keep these dates [30 June-6 July]. Due to the delayed financing, we knew the event might need to be put back. (Andrey Khazbulatov, Chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, interview, 2019)

This supports de Valck’s (2007, p.207) argument that “festivals depend on many other factors for their survival; they necessarily have to compromise”. Having multiple tasks and disputes between various interests has reduced the festival’s power as a strong cultural voice. Khazbulatov’s words also invite comparison with the challenges that the Bangkok Film Festival had to face. Like the EurIFF in East Asia, the Bangkok Film Festival was also launched in 1998. The Tourism Board of Thailand (TAT), which was the main sponsor of the event, insisted that the festival dates be switched from September 2002 to January in 2003 because it was the only month that the TAT had nothing else on, not to mention a bribery scandal connected with a US company. The US Department of Justice arrested two American citizens for bribing the governor of TAT with \$1.7 million in order to award Los Angeles-based Film Festival Management Inc. the contract to organise the festival (Rithdee, 2009, p.122). Though there was no large-scale official scandal in relation to the EurIFF, the system of kickbacks is so endemic to Kazakhstan that their use, along with date shifting, can be taken as read (see section 4.2.3).

5.3.2 Funding

Modern international festivals are mainly funded through public-private partnerships. As a result, most of them have adopted the institutional system of the non-profit organisation. Some uncommercial film festivals are funded first

and foremost through national or local governmental support (Rhyne, 2009). Likewise, EurlFF funding comes entirely from the government budget rather than private sources. However, the festival's planning process was a chaotic affair in comparison to the clear and pre-planned funding process of other international festivals:

The most important thing was that we knew that the festival would be held anyway. It was clear to us that we would organise it. Indeed, we have been preparing for this without any advance funding - talking to people, hotels, cinema theatre networks since winter. When we finally got the money, the only thing we did at the last moment was the signing of formal legal agreements. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurlFF, interview, 2019)

This shows that the late allocation of money did not entirely affect the level of the organisation. This approach to film festivals is relatively unusual and may seem odd. Also, this quote indicates that the EurlFF was regarded as a success thanks to the organisers' network, experience, and negotiating skills. If you compare this to global A-list festivals, such as Venice, Cannes, Locarno, Karlovy Vary and Berlin, they all function as official, state-sanctioned forums, which are also reliant on the financial and ideological support of the country (Stevens, 2016). In this regard, the Union of Filmmakers was completely dependent on the state and had to manoeuvre between government and private organisations in order for the festival's sole organiser to meet the festival's objectives.

To survive, the Eurasia festival, which has a non-commercial character, had to cut down on the usual things that are generally organised on an annual basis. Although funding schemes available to the festival are not generally out in the public domain, EurlFF officials have made such figures available for the first time:⁴⁷

The budget allocated was half of what was given in the previous year's budget. Less than one million dollars. [...] Our new president [K. Tokayev] also said we needed to reduce image-based events. That is why our budget was less. It depends on your approach. We revised the budget and sacrificed a lot of what we would normally do. However, thank God, we

⁴⁷ No funding reports or any statistical data of the EurlFF from the previous years are available.

managed to organise the event. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurlFF, interview, 2019)

In general, it is argued by film scholars that a film festival is a costly event as it needs a huge budget (Bosma, 2015). Although according to Cousins (2009, p.156) the biggest festivals have a budget of £10 million, he notes that: “two of the UK’s festivals cost over £1 million” excluding the travel expenses of film professionals. Yet another example is the Hong Kong International Film Festival where the government contribution was only 52 per cent in 2005, and 55.8 per cent in 2007 (Cheung, 2009, p.110), unlike the EurlFF which has 100 per cent state support. That said, the support is relatively low for a large event, compared to, for example, Hong Kong. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the festival from inviting well-recognised film stars.

Celebrity and glamorous stars have always participated in the EurlFF. For example, in 2018 the festival was attended by the French actor Vincent Cassel and Serbian filmmaker Emir Kusturica. The Hollywood actors Nicolas Cage and Adrien Brody visited the EurlFF in 2017. As argued by Wong (2015, p.135), some Hollywood stars charge festivals for their appearance. Clearly, they are not showing up out of politeness. If the famous Rome festival paid “an outrageous amount” (Wong, 2011, p.135) to Nicole Kidman, then what can we say about an unknown festival’s commercial step in inviting Adrien Brody?

In 2019, expenses were limited to Russian and Turkish actors, although the festival opened in a glamorous Western style, with a red carpet and famous film stars in front of the cameras. Celebrities attending the EurlFF in 2019 included the Turkish actor, Burak Özçivit, known for his role in the series about Sultan Suleiman, *The Magnificent Century* (2014); the Russian filmmaker Sergey Bodrov; the Russian actors Dmitry Dyuzhev and Anton Makarsky. See below for the picture of crowds of admirers and fans surrounding the handsome Özçivit (Figure 24). As Pedersen and Ooi (2010) put it, when stars visit the city, it becomes glamorous and the subject of media attention. So, inviting stars helps publicise the event, and, as a consequence, the country itself. Thus, the EurlFF’s policy towards inviting celebrities contributed to the festival and the country and, ultimately, the brand.



Figure 24 Fans of the Turkish actor Burak Özçivit breaking through the barriers and fighting to take a selfie. Photo taken by the author.

In spite of this, inviting film celebrities to the EurIFF caused some indignation. “There is no benefit for Kazakh cinema spending millions of dollars to invite world stars; who needs it?”, says the director and the instigator of the EurIFF, Slambek Tauekel (interview, 2019). Similarly, another respondent notes: “Last year we spent millions of dollars to invite world stars - what is the benefit to our cinema?” (Sabit Kurmanbekov, director, interview, 2019). It is believed that Kazakhstan paid \$300,000 to have Steven Seagal in 2006. A Kazakh producer, Maira Karsakbayeva, who lives in Canada, complained that Kazakhfilm did not organise any programme for Hollywood stars so as to benefit from their visit (Baitukenov, 2010). Hence, famous film stars served to attract visitors but did not justify the expense. These are the only associated costs, which involved the

EurIFF spending the lion's share of its budget. The Korean director Han Jon Gil noted that the festival had lavish parties almost every day. "This is a great joy and unusual for me. At other festivals, I don't remember having such events" (Han Jon Gil, Korean director, interview, 2019). But for many, such lavishness is seen as a setback for the festival. The executive director of the EurIFF highlighted another issue, flagging up huge contrasts in who does and does not get paid:

Most of the guests are my friends. I have invited most of them myself because they do not ask for a salary, whereas big stars ask for money and require business-class tickets, etc. For example, this time, we have not paid the jury members, although the job is not an easy one. I tried to save money, and by the end of the festival, I will distribute the rest of the amount between the jury members as a surprise. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

International jury members are only supposed to get a small honorarium for their valuable work. The world film festival circuit rarely calls on jurors to work for free. Almost the same situation took place in 2017:

I was forced to leave the post of general director literally five days before the opening of the festival due to insoluble contradictions with the leadership of the Ministry of Culture and Sport and brought the festival to an end with my highly professional team acting as "volunteers". (Rashid Nugmanov, director, interview, 2019)

However, the international film festival circuit does have an example of where an event used unpaid labour. For instance, three coordinators of the Hong Kong International Film Festival worked voluntarily in the early days (Cheung, 2009). Clearly, there is much evidence of the financial issue of the event relying heavily on the organising committee's goodwill and their friends' responsiveness. Networking and international friendship amongst the film world saved the event in this case.

Festivals can raise money (Bosma, 2015). If the EurIFF earned money, it could have justified its expenses. When the president of the EurIFF was asked about the possibility of the festival earning money, he articulated a peculiar point of view:

The festival is not just a rental film that immediately pays you back after one month. It works long term with a completely different system. We

will see the benefits later. (Yermek Tursunov, president of EurIFF 15, press-conference interview, 2019)

On one hand, his view supports the argument given by Dovey (2015, p.8) that “for filmmakers only interested in financial returns ... film festivals hold little charm”. On the other hand, more attention is paid to the financial impact of the festival because it is easily assessed and employers need cost justifications (Allen et al., 2002, p.25). This indicates that the EurIFF does not operate for profit and does not expect to provide the government with any return. Nor does it intend to cover operational costs as the event does not have sales and registration fees (see Chapter 6).

The fact that, in contrast to European self-funded festivals, the EurIFF receives 100 per cent government support explains the state’s influence on the festival. This is the same in Turkey, where “the larger the festival, the bigger the control by central government” (Akser, 2014, p.146). However, it also illustrates the Kazakh state’s interest and involvement in the EurIFF as the leading festival in the whole Central Asian region. It is the same situation with the Pesaro film festival in Italy as well. The result is that there is no pressure to get revenue at the box office (Willemen, 1981/1985). Neither festival has to return any profits to the funding body. If we take the argument of Dickson (2018, p.148) that “festivals must evidence their value and accomplishments in both commercial and cultural terms” then, in this respect, the EurIFF aims to provide “social and cultural benefits” in order to measure the overall impact of the festival (Allen et al., 2002, p.25), rather than focusing on financial revenue.

5.3.3 Festival staff

Staff service plays one of the core roles on the festival circuit. Usually, festivals cannot afford to hire staff permanently. Even larger festivals run with fewer than 20 staff (Iordanova, 2009). Iordanova (2003, pp.122-123) also recalls her impressions from the Berlinale visit:

A visit to Berlinale headquarters outside of the season, in April 2003, took me to the nearly empty large edifice on Potsdamer Platz, where the small

group of full-time festival staffers clustered in one of the top-level corners of the building, occupying no more than five to six rooms. All the rest was empty with prime office space guarded by a concierge downstairs.

Yet another example is the Cannes festival, where the staff reaches 300 only during busy days (Beauchamp and Béhar, 1992). The EurlFF, as a young film event, has not employed permanent staff since its inception. Every year, there is a new team with no connection to the previous one due to the tender system. Overall, more than 30 people worked at the 15th festival, not including members of the selection committee. In this respect, the EurlFF is no different from other major festival.

5.3.4 From Almaty to Astana. From Astana to Nur-Sultan?

Film festivals are tied to their space (Harbord, 2016). They not only play an essential role in the film business, they are also important for their host cities and countries. As Cudny (2018, p.197-198) suggests, the substantial socioeconomic processes that take place here establish a “festivalization” of these places. An example of the influence of a film event on city branding is Rotterdam Film Festival. It has helped to promote Rotterdam as the film capital of the Netherlands (de Valck, 2007), whereas the Copenhagen film festival has been said to “provide Copenhagen as a city and Danish film with visibility” (Pedersen and Mazza, 2011, p.157). A city’s identity, per contra national identity, is formed by determinants such as architecture, culture, traditions, lifestyle, and geographical location, all of which are “special to that city” (Yaldiz et al, 2014, p.222). Some cities have a stronger image than the country in which they are located. “The city’s culture is not always easy to distinguish from the culture of the country as a whole, but cities are simpler, smaller and easier to think of as a single entity” (Anholt, 2007, p.59). Moreover:

A successful and popular film festival can contribute to the place brand by generating awareness of the place and showcasing its ability to successfully stage events. The festival will also give the city a ‘film identity’, for example, Sundance is known as the independent film festival. In many countries, a film festival suggests that there is a - fledging or mature - film industry in the city. (Pedersen and Ooi, 2010 p.320)

In this regard, the central question is: to what extent can a film festival contribute to national identity and nation building and to what extent is it successful in this? If the festival can build film identity” as, for instance, with the Transilvania International Film Festival, which represents a Romanian identity (Sălcudean, 2017), then the host city can be an important part of creating the image of a country. Thus, building a city identity is a primary role of a festival, which plays a secondary role in brand building for the whole nation.

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the importance of location is huge. Cudny (2018, p.198) is absolutely to the point in explaining why “festivalization” has been momentous for former Soviet countries:

After the collapse of communism and the social liberation movements of that era, these countries experienced the introduction of a new market economy and democratic liberties. Therefore, these cities needed to find ways to thrive in a new economic system by generating streams of revenue and branding a city for tourism purposes.

Consumption of place, as a part of tourism, relates to identity as well (Miles, 2015). If the festival directly relates to city branding, then it is possible that changing the location of a festival will have the effect of breaking the chain of influence on a particular city and on the associated nation branding.

There are few examples of moving a festival from one city to another. Some festivals, such as Pusan, have been moved within the city itself (Harbord, 2013), while others have been relocated to a different city. For instance, the Moscow International Film Festival (MIFF), founded in 1935, “alternated location between Karlovy Vary and Moscow” (Mezias et al, 2011. p.172). In this regard, the relocation of the EurIFF needs in-depth examination.

One of the organisers of the EurIFF expressed nostalgia that the festival is not held in its former locale any more.

Usually, the festival was always held in Almaty. Now the government funds more social projects. This year our festival was the only big cultural event which the government needed due to Capital Day. That is why we are holding this festival for the third time in Nur-Sultan [formerly Astana]. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

The point that emerges here is that the EurlIFF has had to face several challenges. First of all, the festival was unexpectedly moved to Astana in 2017, to be held from 22-28 July, due to an EXPO event taking place there.⁴⁸ This was driven by the MCS, which wanted the two events to coincide as EXPO 2017 had been taking place in Astana since 10 June (Beumers, 2017). The same happened with the second EurlIFF in 2005 when the festival, taking place on the eve of presidential elections, was used to raise the image of the president (Nogerbek, 2006). These examples show that the EurlIFF sometimes served as a political instrument to fulfil the state's needs. Secondly, the fifth festival in 2008 was held in Astana for the first time, after moving from Almaty (www.kazakhfilmstudios.kz). This shows that shifting the event back and forth between two cities created a lack of consistency and stability.

Furthermore, as film festival scholar Marijke de Valck (2007, p.137) notes:

The physical location of the festival is very important for the festival's image of cultural difference and it is used in festival marketing strategies to compete with other film festivals. Location, the element most central to a festival's image, is usually reflected in the name. By and large, festivals are named after the city where they take place.

Interestingly, in contrast to Cannes, Venice, Locarno, Toronto, and many other internationally regarded festivals, the EurlIFF was not renamed after Nur-Sultan, nor Almaty. If we consider de Valck's argument, this may not prevent the EurlIFF from building its own image and, by association, the country's image also. However, it should not be overlooked that although film festivals contribute to place branding, their primary aim is to promote films and film culture rather than cities (Peterson and Ooi, 2010). A festival and city brand can be mutually beneficial to each other in terms of building an image, as in the case of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, whose status was enhanced by Hong Kong's reputation (Cheung, 2009). As de Valck and Loist (2009, p.187) describe it, "the city, much more than the nation, is the spatial entity that has come to define a festival's identity". Thus, it is worth considering the extent to which the Nur-

⁴⁸ EXPO is a world trade exhibition, which has taken place every five years since 1851. It has huge impact as a mega-event on the development of tourism infrastructure and attracting investment to the host-city as well as creating an image for both city and country.

Sultan brand contributes to the EurIFF and the extent to which the city benefits from the event.

Having been associated with warm and beautiful Almaty for such a long time, the EurIFF had cemented its place there, which had served as a home for the whole of Kazakh film since the 1930s. Then, after having to adjust to Astana, just two years later the name of the new capital was renamed Nur-Sultan after the life-president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev (see sections 2.1 and 2.4). The Eurasian festival had just started getting used to a new space, when the new name of the capital sent out confusing messages for those who had just recently become familiar with the event. For example, the EurIFF is still called the Astana festival in the FIAPF's listings (FIAPF, 2019) on its website. Now, the festival crew needs to rebuild not only its brand at the new location but also, once more, with a new name. Not a good start, given festival locations are a central point in the festival network (Stringer, 2003). It was argued by Fauve (2015, p.111) that "Astana has become a national symbol of Kazakhstan". Now efforts expended on the branding of Astana have gone to waste, as people have had to get used to the new city name, Nur-Sultan. Given some Kazakhstani people still call the capital Astana, the difficulty of branding the festival in Nur-Sultan doubles both locally and internationally. If "the festival brand and the city branding are interconnected and they are built organically" (Sălcudean, 2017, p.212), the city needs to build its own identity before the EurIFF can even begin to brand it once a year. When the festival's name is branded, it is "a hallmark of quality" (de Valck, 2017, p.79). All the challenges have affected the overall image of the festival as well as the country. From all this, one can see that politics, location and the international market do not come together to optimal effect.

There were seemingly sound reasons for shifting the venue of the EurIFF. The primary intention was to reflect the professional and cultural status of the city in Central Asia and CIS countries. As well as this, in theory, it was done to save money and spend it appropriately. However, Kanat Torebay questions how valid this was:

In my opinion, if it was in Almaty, the budget would be like this [raising his hand high above his head to suggest plenty]. We would have organised

it in a more sophisticated way. Many of our filmmakers and directors are in Almaty. But we had to bring them all to Nur-Sultan for this festival. I do not want to offend anyone but, basically, the place for the festival is Almaty. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

The British scholar Birgit Beumers shared his opinion after visiting the 13th EurIFF in Astana. She recalls that “the lack of a network of critics which would be able to coordinate and support such an event in Almaty with its superior cultural infrastructure, was a downside of the relocation to Astana” (Beumers, 2017, n.p.). This is an example of what Rhyne (2009, p.14) calls “mediating the interests of governments in managing their subjects and resources” with regard to festivals. Moving the festival to Nur-Sultan increased rather than reduced financial costs. It is also fair to say that moving the festival to the capital city changed the whole character of the event. Cinephiles, and all people related to the cinema network were, not surprisingly, shocked to hear about the relocation.

The effects of relocating a festival can be illustrated in the case of Berlinale as well. Berlinale moved to the Potsdamer Platz after the German government moved from Bonn to Berlin in 1999. The initial plan was that the festival’s new location could be both a symbol and an entertainment centre for the newly united Berlin (de Valck, 2007). Again, there is a parallel between political and cultural changes in Germany and Kazakhstan, though their motives differed. The Berlin film festival had been struggling with space in West Berlin because of the growing number of visitors (de Valck, 2007), whereas the Kazakh government relocated the EurIFF in order to advertise its relatively new capital to the world.

Take the example of Poland, which moved its national festival from the 1000-year-old Gdansk to Gdynia. Cudny (2018, p.204) describes details that emerged from changing the place of the festival: “More specifically, the festival, which was once held in small rooms, lost the aura of a film discussion club when it moved to the much larger space of the main stage in the Music Theatre in Gdynia”. One can make a parallel between these two occasions. Gdansk and Almaty, respectively, have half a million and nearly two million inhabitants. One more similarity is that Gdynia was only set up in 1926 (Cudny, 2018) and Nur-Sultan was founded in 1830 but was much younger compared to Almaty.

However, both of them are comparatively new in comparison to their counterparts, Gdansk and Almaty. The next thing that needs in-depth analysis is geographical distance. Gdynia is a city neighbouring old Gdansk, and so is much easier for the relocation of the festival, whereas Nur-Sultan is an 18-hour drive from Almaty (see Figure 1). That is why, as our interviewee Torebay revealed, it adds costs to cover aeroplane tickets to bring filmmakers from Almaty. An additional difference between these two relocations is a political one. One can say that moving the festival from Gdansk to Gdynia was an attempt to avoid connections being made between the festival and the shipyard of the Solidarity movement in Gdansk (Cudny, 2018). When it comes to the Kazakh festival, the state just wanted to popularise the capital and use the pre-established credentials of the event in Almaty.

While Teo (2009) sees the success of three major East Asian film festivals (Pusan, Hong-Kong, and Singapore) in their locations, the EurIFF being held in Nur-Sultan could borrow the slogan of the capital, “the Heart of Eurasia”, and take advantage of its location. However, at the moment, there is little evidence that the EurIFF has become a defining feature of Nur-Sultan, or vice versa. Therefore, the idea of Eurasian-ness is limited at the festival.

In 2017, when the EurIFF moved to Nur-Sultan for the first time, the capital was eager to show guests its EXPO exhibition. That is why all other venues, such as the Marriott and Wyndham Garden hotels, were used to accommodate guests and to hold discussions and master classes. The Chaplin Cinemas were chosen for film screenings as they were close to the EXPO exhibition centre on the left bank of the river Yesil. In 2019, however, it was no longer considered necessary to hold the event near the EXPO:

This year we thought to make everything comfortable for our guests and participants. Previously, the practice was different when participants were accommodated in several hotels. Films were screened in several cinema theatres. This year we decided to accommodate the guests in one hotel and organise screenings only in a single movie theatre located nearby. It was all very comfortable and convenient. I think this is something we will stick to in the future. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

Harbord (2013) asserts that the topography of a place can be changed to suit the needs of an event. However, in the case of the EurIFF, according to Torebay, it makes use of existing places. Local practice in the festival city connects it to the global circuit. In this regard, the film festival is, again, local, and global at the same time.

Interestingly, the EurIFF has organised its events in different venues every year. Only for the past two years have the opening and closing ceremonies been held in the Kazakhstan concert hall in Nur-Sultan, whereas the Chaplin Cinema theatres are the main venues for film screenings. In 2019, films were screened in the cinema network in the Khan Shatyr centre (see Figure 25). However, this exhibition site is not the festival's annual fixed location. The reason for this is that many festivals cannot function as a working enterprise with other continuous operations under way throughout the year (Iordanova, 2009) and therefore only the EurIFF is allowed a temporary exhibition space.



Figure 25 From left to right: the Khan Shatyr shopping and entertainment centre, which was designed by the British architect Norman Foster. Still from www.youtube.com. Rixos President Astana hotel in Nur-Sultan. <https://presidentastana.rixos.com/>.

The same situation was noticed in Berlin at Potsdamer Platz, where press facilities were located in different buildings, without a single place that could serve as a centralised organising hub. Such a scattering of activities can lead to “decentralisation of the festival” (de Valck, 2007, p.79). Another example is Dubai International Film Festival, where event-goers are faced with the challenge of travelling from Madinat Jumeirah (the place for the box office and press conferences) to Emirates Mall (cinema theatres) due to city congestion (Guerrasio, 2008, n.p.). In the case of the EurlIFF, the five-star hotel Rixos President Astana (see Figure 25) served as a venue for a press centre, press conferences and master classes, as well as accommodating and catering for all the guests. In this regard, the work was well centralised and, most importantly, convenient for guests.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore how the EurlIFF fits into a nation-building context. Given that most film festivals have “built specific brands for themselves” (Odabasi, 2018, p.74), this analysis has addressed my second research question: “To what extent does the EurlIFF contribute to nation building and projection of the nation?” Based on my visit, this part of the study allowed an extensive investigation of the event, including interviews with festival insiders. The analysis has focused on people who worked closely on organising the EurlIFF behind the scenes and those who actively participated in the event. This case study has explored how the specific socio-cultural contexts - mentality, ideology, and attitude of the country - influenced the engagement with this festival.

Instability is clearly the main factor that hinders development of the event. Firstly, the yearly change of leadership and festival staff prevented the establishment of experience and feedback from previous years. Secondly, last-minute funding and the late announcement of festival dates reshaped the course of the event and had a negative impact on the image not only of the event but on Kazakhstan’s in general. Thirdly, the decision to move the festival from its

cultural and historical capital, Almaty, to the administrative capital, Nur-Sultan, to promote EXPO 2017 and the new capital proved that major decisions regarding the EurIFF are entirely dependent on government interests. The official reasoning behind this was to lend the event weight by setting it in the capital city and reinforce its position as an outstanding event. The EurIFF could be used politically in this way because the government, as the main funder, dictates the rules. In this way politics affects the management of the festival's image. As a result, the location of the festival goes against the needs of both the festival and the international market. It may be that if the festival remains located in the capital, it would become more Nur-Sultan-centric, but it is still uncertain whether the EurIFF can find a place to call home in Nur-Sultan. This makes identity building for the festival problematic.

If moving the capital from Almaty to Astana, as argued previously in section 2.3, shows the country has an unsettled character as an ethno-political unit (Holm-Hansen, 1999), the same may apply to Kazakhstan's film policy regarding the EurIFF, which was frequently moved between the two major cities. Hence, all its challenges reduce the extent to which the EurIFF can contribute to effective nation building in Kazakhstan.

This chapter found that the organisational process of the annual EurIFF is quite unusual and distinct from its counterparts in European countries. The next chapter will look at the component phenomena of the festival, such as programming and curating, and the relationship these have with notions of audience.

6 The EurlFF's programme and audience

Introduction

The previous chapter provided an essential understanding of the EurlFF's emergence in Kazakhstan along with its significance and the major challenges it had to face.

This chapter now looks at how films are selected at the festival by examining the roles of curators and international juries. This will involve a close examination of audience composition and how its various perceptions have impacted on the evolving image of the EurlFF. In the course of this, I will explore how the festival itself helps to define and separate out distinctly different audiences. One can see how this will become increasingly important, given that the final section investigates how participants at the festival understand the event and what impact this has on the role of the EurlFF in Kazakh film consumption. In doing this, the chapter, along with the previous one, will answer the second research question: "To what extent does the EurlFF contribute to nation building and projection of the nation?"

In other words, this chapter will examine how the Kazakh example of a film festival model fits within existing understandings of the global festival circuit. I argue that festival programming and audience perceptions may shape Kazakhstan's image.

6.1 Programme

Film festivals are an essential exhibition network. Moreover, a festival can be defined by its films (Wong, 2011). But then, on the other hand, an understanding of cinema can likewise be shaped by film festivals (Ruoff, 2012). Hence, films and film festivals are interconnected and help define each other. Programming, apart from being a fundamental part of a festival, is a key factor in shaping this understanding. To understand film festivals, it is crucial to understand the scope and power of programming (de Valck, 2012). Bosma (2015, p.70) defines the programme as "the product" of the festival, while de Valck (2007) distinguishes that programming is, firstly, a cultural practice. It is essential to study

contributors such as programmers (Wong, 2011) to examine what role festivals play in defining cinema.

6.1.1 Curation

Film festivals are often characterised as constructors of cinematic taste. Stevens (2016) has distinguished two dimensions of the notion of taste - personal and cultural. Both work to construct taste within the festival environment, which is different from curating in theatres or curating an archive (Bosma, 2015). Let us consider Stevens' view (2016, p.138) first of all:

If events function to construct taste, they equally operate as sites where such taste can be recognised and apprehended by an audience. The ability of spectators, whether professional or civilian, to comprehend the construction of taste privileged by film festivals is integral to the validation of such celebrations as culturally relevant and artistically worthy.

If film festivals work as the leading creators of taste, then how is this taste formed and who constructs it? In Bosma's (2015) words, it is the film curator who singles out films for public screenings at a festival. The curator has two primary responsibilities: to create an eye-catching programme and to attract a broad audience; in general, to "create added value". Curation brings together film and audience, allowing them to interact (Bosma, 2015, p.69). The EurIFF has been faced with different programme directors each year and, therefore, every year it is triggering different tastes. The Italian film producer, Eleonora Granata (see Figure 26), invited to be a short-term programmer for the 15th EurIFF, recalled that she wanted to bring the best films of 2018-2019 to Kazakhstan. She was one of the most authoritative selectors and producers in Hollywood. She had been a programmer and co-director of festivals all over the world and had tremendous experience, including seven years at the Berlinale and Venice festivals. Also, Granata had experience in post-Soviet films. Thanks to her work in Estonia, the Tallin Black Knights Film Festival was included in the A-list festivals accredited by the FIAPF:



Figure 26 On the left is the programme director of the 15th EurIFF Eleonora Granata at the press-conference, 28 June, 2019, in Nur-Sultan. Photo taken by the author.

It has been difficult because we wanted to select three or four times more and there were so many films. The festival would really like to streamline and find a common discourse within the film, selecting those that could give a cohesive image of the festival programme. That was the real difficulty - trying to focus on all those separate films and find some common ground between them in order to represent this year's best achievement in art. (Eleonora Granata, programme director of the 15th EurIFF press-conference interview, 2019)

This suggests that the EurIFF's approach to programming was no different from other festivals. They sought films that would be of interest both to its organisers and its audience. This is very much proving Bosma's (2015) point. Succeeding in presenting an appealing programme is one of the significant challenges for the festival curator because the festival is where the image can be built or destroyed. Granata's words also reinforce the idea that "festival programmers select films that they consider worthy of being seen" (de Valck, 2012, p.26). The curator took her responsibility seriously and sought "to recognize and create stage taste, capturing the 'best' films and 'discovering' more" (Wong, 2011 p.7). Granata continues:

Although films may be extremely different from one to another, they may have some common denominators that connect them. Such connections are similarly reflected in what is happening in the world and our society with all the conflict that we have today. Our top priority, of course, was creative achievement. Let's take the case of controversial films. In such a case people hate it or love it. This leads to a strong emotion which means it is giving you something that you actually take away with you from the cinema. So that was what we were looking for. (Eleonora Granata, programme director of the 15th EurIFF press-conference interview, 2019)

Granata implies that the EurIFF shapes “what films we as audiences and scholars will see, what films we respect or neglect, and often, how we read such cinematic works” (Wong, 2011, p.1). Bosma (2015) argues that strategies, like presenting quality films and building a bridge between them and the audience and the outside world, are subjective and personal. That is why the selection process is a compound of idealism, aspiration, and intuition. Therefore, this process is “mysterious” (Bosma, 2015, p.72). If we analyse the EurIFF's curatorial practice from this point of view, the strategy of the festival can be subjective just as it is for other international film festivals.

As a gatekeeper of the event, Granata's taste, in favouring the best films within European and Asian cinema, played a significant factor in the choice of films for the festival. Again, as the above quote suggests, in her view, EurIFF films are local and global at the same time. Her taste determined the whole structure of the 15th EurIFF and how the audience perceived these films. This supports de Valck and Loist's idea that the curation of the festival depends on the programmer's “ideas and ideals” (2009, p.182). In this respect, the EurIFF serves as a filter for authentic personal taste (Bosma, 2015). Moreover, Granata's view has implications for Kerkinos's (2009) explanation of film/curator interaction: the programmers' voices are reflected in their choices, that is to say, their thoughts on the intellectual value and aesthetics of the film are akin to resolving a complex puzzle, where each film chosen connects with the others to produce a certain representation and discourse. The programmers' voice is “heard” through the selections for festival competitions.

But there are others involved in the decision-making. The international Selection Committee also helped to form the content. In 2018, the Selection Committee consisted of, primarily, Kazakhstani film critics and directors, but it broadened out in 2019. It was made up of the following: Claudia Landsberger, a member of

the European Film Academy and of the selection committee of the Berlinale Competition Programme and the Hamburg Film Fund; Alicia Simon, film curator, journalist; Janpietro Balia, curator of international film festivals and film critic; Matteo Jenkinson, film director and Oleg Boretskiy, a film critic from Kazakhstan who worked with Eleanora Granata. All of these figures were extremely important for the event because of their wide film festival experience. As Czach (2004, p.84) puts it, “programming is precisely about tastemaking - on an individual, national, and international level”. In the case of the EurIFF personnel, local and global intersect in a shift from domestic towards international experience.

The list of participant countries was wide-ranging. Apart from the primary contest, which was a combination of films and animations from Kazakhstan, France, Macedonia, Italy, the Philippines, China, Russia, Israel, Ukraine, Australia among others, there was no evidence of the active participation of the host country’s films in the main competitive programmes. Only two films from Kazakhstan, one in the main competition and one in the short-form and animation contest, made the schedule. The chairman of international jury members described the list of films as “Fantastic,” adding: “I am very impressed with this list. It is going to be really hard to judge this and make a choice. Eleonora has given us the opportunity to engage in some really great, serious and beautiful material” (Tamas Toth, chairman of the international jury of the EurIFF, interview, 2019). For all that, according to data provided by Ayan Naizabekov, the programme coordinator, the 2019 EurIFF was not very competitive, selecting 65 films out of only 100 applicants. By way of comparison, in 2018, the EurIFF selected 42 films out of 1,100 applicants (Eurasia Film Festival, 2018b).⁴⁹ A possible reason for the low number of applications was the late announcement of closing dates. Late funding by the Kazakhstani authorities (see the sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2) impacted on the expansion of the festival because the more films that apply, the greater the choice. It can be assumed that the EurIFF had to invite the foreign curator to ensure a high-quality programme.

⁴⁹ 12 feature films out of 500 applicants and 30 short films out of 600 applicants.

Another factor to be considered regarding film choice at international festivals is local restrictions and censorship. Some consider European festivals to be characterised by a lack of political independence, with a top-down approach dictated by government agendas. Examples of this can also be found on the Asian continent, such as Hong Kong International Film Festival, where the local government controls the festival remotely (Cheung, 2009). Government-sanctioned forum lists operate in Venice, Cannes, Locarno, and Berlin, which sometimes pursue national rather than cinematic concerns by choosing films to endorse a particular country (Stevens, 2016, p.30). Although the EurIFF did have a top-down approach dictated by the government (in terms of dates, changing location, and late funding described in Chapter 5), there were no restrictions or censorship issues when it came to programming and curation:

I have to say that the unique quality of Eurasia is that the organisers allowed me complete freedom along with good resources and good people; there was no censorship, no restrictions. This is very important because sometimes you have to take care - "Oh no, no, no, you can't say this" - but here in Eurasia, it was really great. I asked first, "Do you have any censorship?" "No, just go ahead and get the best. Bring the best creative films of the world here. Nothing else matters". And that's why I hopefully managed it, thanks to this freedom, this space. I am very proud of this programming. (Eleonora Granata, programme director of the EurIFF, press-conference interview, 2019)

She clearly makes the point that the festival did not engage with any form of international politics and was free from censorship. Indeed, the curator has to take full responsibility if they allow the screening of films that are banned in their country of origin, given that it is not just that the film may have been banned but also the filmmakers may be jailed (Bosma, 2015, p.76). In contrast to the EurIFF, the Dubai and Abu Dhabi International Film Festivals in the UAE faced challenges of censorship and local restrictions (Akser, 2014) as films with violence or sexual content were completely taboo. Restrictions by UAE censorship laws were recently lifted on festival films (Guerrasio, 2008). A curator has to overcome these kinds of restrictions (Bosma, 2015). The film curator of the 15th EurIFF was happy to be free from any such issues having experienced them numerous times elsewhere. Although festival policy is severely impacted by the Kazakh government, it does not interfere with the creative side of the event, such as scrutiny of curation with respect to the content and selection of films.

A further factor is how festivals have been the space where the interests of nationalism and internationalism meet (Rich, 2013). Granata also supports Rich's argument that "film festivals bring the world to town, and they also bring your town to the world" (2013, p.158). In the case of the EurIFF, Kazakh film makers and festival organisers could benefit from the international experience of organising such a mass event.

However, another interviewee took a different point of view on the selection process:

We have selected the best films that were winners of the largest A-list festivals in the world so that the residents of the capital could go and see what real cinema is. Maybe those young filmmakers taking their first steps are then able to look back critically at their work. (Yermek Tursunov, the president of EurIFF 15, press conference interview, 2019)

Interestingly, the EurIFF held the Asian premiere of the black comedy-thriller *Parasite* (2019) by Korean Bong Joon-Ho, one of the world's best directors. In May 2019, the contemporary satire was the first Korean movie awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Festival. The film also won Best Picture, Best Director, Best International Feature and Best Screenplay at the Oscars in 2020 (Yeung and Seo, 2020). The EurIFF programme scheduled *Parasite* between Cannes and the Oscars, creating a link in the chain of the film's festival history and international awards. As argued by Iordanova (2009, p.31), the programmer's job depends on personal networking. Curator Eleonora Granata's international experience and her connections helped the EurIFF to screen prestige films such as *Parasite*, which lifted the festival's status. Nonetheless, according to the FIAPF's regulations, A-list festivals must screen at least 14 new films every year in their official competition (Iordanova, 2009, p.28), which is one of the fundamental rules of programming (Ruoff, 2012). However, the EurIFF did not have official premiere films in its main competition programme in 2019. The Kazakh-made *The Secret of a Leader* had taken part in the Busan film festival and in the A-list Moscow Film Festival in April 2019, where it received the Grand Prix. By covering the films of a geographically vast area, the EurIFF has a "strong international character", where audiences want to see world films rather than programmes with a regional colour for the local population (de Valck and Loist, 2009, p.187). In this regard, the EurIFF followed the example of global film events.

The festival's scope is another means of analysing the event. One of the distinguishing aspects of film curation is the territorial scope of a programme (Bosma, 2015). Film festivals may screen regional and national as well as international content. In this connection one of the interviewees pointed out:

The only rule of Eurasia is determining the country of origin of the films. Everything else is free game for everyone. The main competition is that of films coming from Europe and Asia. Other than that, everything else is completely open. (Eleonora Granata, programme director of 15th EurIFF, press-conference interview, 2019)

The EurIFF prioritises its content by geographical criteria (Slocum, 2009 p.147). Examples of the clustering of film festivals can be found among Latin American and African festivals. In both cases, the geographical proximity of a country played a central role in its selection, showing films to be grouped and presented according to a prescribed logic (Kerkinos, 2009, p.173). In the past, paying tribute to its name, Eurasia, the original idea was that the Kazakh festival would move from year to year between the capitals of CIS countries, but the initiative was not supported by other republics and the idea was dropped. Needless to say, if shifting the location of the festival to the capital changed the character of the whole event (see section 5.3.4), moving the EurIFF across post-Soviet countries each year would have caused an endless cycle of challenges at international level. However, in 2019, the festival tried to fully reflect its initial concept, which was to build a “platform for successful cooperation between Asia and Europe” (EurIFF, 2017b) and to establish a cultural bridge between East and West (EurIFF, 2018b), combining movies from two continents (EurIFF, 2019). Here the idea of Eurasianism (see section 2.3) echoed in the festival. Viewing the idea as the main concept behind the festival, Kazakhstan, despite renaming its capital twice in two decades, showed no desire to rebrand and stuck to the old name of the event.

6.1.2 International jury

Alongside film curators, international jury members provide world access for the chosen films. The EurIFF, as the most prominent film event in Kazakhstan, was always criticised not only for its organisational issues, but also for award

proliferation. For instance, scholar Birgit Beumers (2017, n.p.) recalls one of the drawbacks of the 13th EurIFF:

If a festival has to be subordinate to ministerial commands to bring in some [stars] and exclude others [critical voices], then cultural bridges will only be partially made and thus prone to collapse. And by this, I mean cultural bridges, not just of regions and territories, but also of various social and political views, both dissenting and conformist voices. Eurasia 13 did not do itself a favour by awarding a patriotic film over an artistic product, and by excluding a number of less conformist filmmakers and film historians alike from the competition.

The executive director of the festival, Kanat Torebay, also recalled the bizarre system of award distribution at earlier events:

When Azimov [Sergey Azimov, independent producer and director, head of Kazakhfilm 2002-2007] was the head of JSC Kazakhfilm, they organised the EurIFF. It was nonsense that you could not find anywhere in the world. They produced the films, conducted the festival itself, and awarded their own directors. It was not right. Then it went in the completely opposite direction. We started distributing awards only for guests. This was also wrong. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

All this may suggest that the festival has compromised the judges' impartiality. Beumers and Torebay both argue that earlier festivals had an unfair judging strategy that ruined the image of the event in the international arena. Attempts were made to avoid this in 2019. Then, three distinct juries worked at the 15th EurIFF: the main jury, the short form jury, and the independent jury of NETPAC joined by an International Federation of Film Producers' Associations (FIPRESCI) representative. The international feature competition jury presiding over the main competition consisted of five people: Tamas Toth, the chairman (Hungary), Kirill Grebenshchikov (Russia), Liu Zhe (China), Talgat Temenov (Kazakhstan) and Hervé Schneid (France) (see Figure 27). This composition of jury members is impressive. If Tamas Toth and Talgat Temenov are famous directors in Hungary and Kazakhstan, respectively, Hervé Schneid is an editor who has worked with the directors Sally Potter, Lars Von Trier, and Mike Figgis, who won the Oscar for best editor in 1992 for *Delicatessen*. For more than 20 years Liu Zhe has been organising the Chinese film festival with the poetic name China Golden Rooster, also known as the "Chinese Oscars". Kirill Grebenshchikov has been a Russian actor since 1992.

Some international festivals have experienced criticism for appointing particular jurors. For instance, there was a questionable choice of jurors at the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival and many Turkish filmmakers were unhappy about the choice of films and the fact that some were censored (Akser, 2014 p.151). The distinctive feature of the EurIFF is that jury members are invited and appointed by the directors of the event rather than by selection.



Figure 27 The main international jury members from left to right: Hervé Schneid (France), Liu Zhe (China), Tamas Toth, the chairman (Hungary), with programme director Eleonora Granata and the president of the 15th EurIFF, Yermek Tursunov. Photo taken by the author.

The criteria for selecting winners differ from festival to festival. The chairman of the jury revealed his thoughts about his vision of selection criteria:

I'm in search of how classic films are made. Wherein lies their particular secret? What certain magic something does this film have that makes it relevant for future generations? I wonder how films capture time. My approach differs from those who think that the film should emotionally affect one, or that they are looking for depth. That is also very important, of course. But I just have a specific approach - I'm looking for longevity, or something... I'm in search of a high level of thinking. That's what I dig for. [...] They can be of different genres, different languages, different approaches, but which contain holistic artistic work. Integrity is the most important thing for me. By way of these films, strange as it seems, I am

attempting to delve into myself to find out who I am. (Tamas Toth, the chairman of the international jury of the 15th EurlFF, interview, 2019)

The main criteria used by jurors are quite specific. Jury members' choices clearly depend on personal taste and cultural preferences (de Valck, 2010). One of the critical points in Toth's quote is that the work of the jury is not a criticism but analysis of these films, although it can be subjective. Toth is a close friend of Yermek Tursunov and Kanat Torebay, the organisers of the festival. Toth graduated from VGIK film school in Moscow with the directors of the Kazakh New Wave, Serik Aprymov, Ardak Amirkulov, Rashid Nugmanov and others. "I have known Yermek for a long time. Our views coincide in many ways. I think that's why I was invited to chair the jury. I feel like I am at home", said the chairman. It was necessary to look further into this because, given the award proliferation and the role of networking in selecting judges, there are doubts the selection of winners would be unbiased:

Call me sentimental. But I learnt to analyse film on my home turf. All art is subjective. So, I don't have any qualms about saying that, if I feel close to a Kazakh film in any way, then we will choose it. Maybe our decision is subjective. However, what kind of decision won't be? When we talk about cinema, there is no jury that can be totally objective. There is nothing that is totally objective. (Tamas Toth, chairman of the international jury of the EurlFF, interview, 2019)

This statement is in line with de Valck's (2010) argument that decisions are ultimately subordinate to subjective assessments, even if competitive programmes are set by experienced, international standards. One may argue that festival awards are "programmed" by the event. Not by direct manipulation but by the subtle ways that festivals work (de Valck, 2010); nor in the sense of manipulating jury decisions by direct intervention, but in all sorts of more nuanced ways, such as how juries choose films and set assessment criteria that match their views. When asked about making a fair decision, the executive director answered:

If our films are influential, let them win. If our movies are a bit weak, guests can win. Everything must be transparent and clear. Although I know all jury members, most of them are my friends. I demonstratively avoid them. Myself, as the director of this festival, and Yermek Tursunov, as the president of this festival, have no right to interfere. Participants also follow personal ethics in the film industry. They also do not come

over to jury members. Nobody can influence the jury. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

The testimony received suggests that decisions need to be made justly as a fundamental principle for the EurIFF team, which consisted of five people from Hungary, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, and France. The EurIFF has grown up compared to the 2000s. For example, Bauyrzhan Nogerbek (2006, n.p.), a Kazakh film scholar and Chairman of the Selection Committee of the second EurIFF in 2005, complained that after the event all the prizes were distributed according to the principle “from the oldest to the youngest”. He meant by this that the main prizes went to Russia as it was an older brother, while the rest of the awards went to former Soviet Republics. “Saddest of all: not a single film from Europe or Asia received an award at this so-called Eurasian film festival. [...] It turned out, as always, to be a local, all-Union mini-film festival” (Nogerbek, 2006, n.p.). If we go by de Valck’s (2010) argument, the system of international judgement at the festival is often not democratic because jurors from Western countries used to dominate the festival. If we look at earlier festivals, the suggestion is that judgement was unfair due to old fashioned Soviet-style traditions. It seems one cannot win.

During the festival, different cultural tastes among jurors can cause disagreement (de Valck, 2010). However, the chairman of the international jury, Tamas Toth, announcing the Grand Prix winner, declared that the decision was made without a dissenting voice, with all five jurors coming to a mutual conclusion.

The Grand Prix of the 15th EurIFF went to the Kazakh film *The Secret of a Leader* by Farkhat Sharipov (see Figure 28). The film is about Kanat, a 40-year-old man who experienced a mid-life crisis. He was sent from his job to attend leadership training, where the coach instructs him on how to succeed and become a leader. Kanat meets his classmate Danik, who is now a manager. Danik finds in Kanat a friend with whom he can go to the bar and drink. One night they spend the evening with prostitutes, and some days later Kanat sees on the TV news how a father was looking for his lost daughter. Kanat immediately realises it was one of the prostitutes and that she had disappeared on the night they met. Kanat talks it over with his influential friend, who convinces him to keep quiet about it. The film poses a question to its audience about the degree to

which someone is prepared to sacrifice their integrity in order to solve their financial problems. It is worth noting that the film is full of swearing and it is the first time in Kazakh cinema history such a film was funded by the state and won the Grand Prix at a Kazakh festival.



Figure 28 Still from *The Secret of a Leader*. www.koreanherald.com.

One can argue that a Grand Prix represents the festival's image (de Valck, 2010). Sălcudean (2017, p.207) sums it up best when she argues that the Transylvania International Film Festival became a Romanian brand and represented Romanian identity by paying particular attention to Romanian films. By this measure, the Grand Prix and the 15th EurIFF had a real Kazakh identity. However, it is interesting how this Kazakh-made film overtook *Parasite*, the winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2019 and an Oscar winner in 2020. It seems that the argument by Peterson and Ooi (2010, p.321) is pertinent here: "for a film festival, certain types of films would be more warmly welcomed because they are seen to fit well with the city, as portrayed through the city brand identity." Indeed, *The Secret of a Leader* captured how bribery and the chaotic way of life of Kazakh officials win over decency, honesty, and humanity. The story of the film shows the true identity, not only of Almaty where this movie was filmed, but also the whole of Kazakh society, mired as it is in corruption. One might argue here that jury members voted for screening the truth. Probably because of this, the film won the hearts of its audience.

6.2 Audience

Its audience is who a festival is designed for. According to Ruoff (2012), the public, not the films, makes the event. The festivals are even defined as “a site for holy pilgrimage for its audience” (Stevens, 2016, p.143). It is often film critics, scholars, journalists, and film professionals who are associated with the audience (Odabasi, 2018). However, one of the functions of the festival is to provide the space for a film to be discussed by both specialists and non-specialists alike (Harbord, 2016). Furthermore, the identity of the audience is divided into domestic, international, and professional (Sălcudean, 2017, p.201). Both groups can demonstrate a high level of diversity (Bosma, 2015). That is why, in the section below, I will explore the perception not only of film professionals but also visitors, the viewership, cinephiles and participants.

6.2.1 Audience engagement in theatre-screened films

A progressive film festival is a unique space for films and spectators (Bosma, 2015). Peranson (2009) distinguishes two models of film festival: the business model and the audience model. However, most festivals have elements of both. I argue that the EurIFF has a mixed model. As Wong (2011, p.54) suggests, “the most audience-friendly festivals are those that are smaller, less business-oriented, and local, whose objectives are showing good films to an appreciative audience”. This is the present view at the EurIFF:

The festival is primarily there for filmmakers. For those who work in this area. Secondly, there is a community in our society, which loves film. It is for this audience. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

Here, Toreby indicates that the EurIFF has specific goals and a targeted audience. This idea is supported by Odabasi’s (2018) argument that every film festival is organised with a specific audience in mind. On the other hand, the audience determines how and for whom festivals matter (Ruoff, 2012). However, the key question is how well the EurIFF interacts in practice with its audience and consequently how that audience perceives the event.

One may argue that the audience can be explored through cinema theatres. Many festivals use open-air screenings whereas the EurIFF uses cinema theatres. Film screenings were held in halls 2 and 3 of the Chaplin Cinema theatre (see Figure 29). It is located almost 20-minutes' walking distance from the Rixos President Astana hotel - the main venue for Q&A sessions, press conferences and master classes and just 10 minutes' drive from Kazakhstan Central Concert Hall, the venue for the opening and closing ceremonies (see section 5.3.4). With respect to its audience, setting aside foreign guests specifically invited and sponsored with travel and accommodation costs being met, the festival cannot brag about its extensive coverage and foreign attendance. This clearly impacts on the nature of its audience.

The EurIFF's audience in cinema theatres includes local actors and directors, film producers, contestants, volunteers, and residents of Nur-Sultan, rather than an itinerant international audience. This shows that EurIFF has limited promotion of the Kazakh film industry to an international audience except for invited guests. This is not so different from the Sydney and Melbourne festivals in Australia, which focuses squarely on domestic audiences (Stevens, 2016).



Figure 29 The Chaplin Cinema in the Khan Shatyr shopping Mall, Nur-Sultan. www.eiff.kz.

The festival's interaction with its audience was minimised for a number of practical reasons. Film screenings were accessible to both press and guests with a special badge for accreditation and tickets for festival-goers. A limited number of seats was available for the general public as the number of guests, their friends and relatives, and international jurors almost reached the capacity of the small cinemas. Films were available from 10am until noon in this theatre and there were no repeat screenings. All of this reduced access to the wider public.

The executive director of the festival revealed that for the first time in the history of the festival it had many spectators:

It was unexpected. The cinema theatre in the Khan Shatyr shopping mall was packed out. People were sitting along the stairwells to watch films. This is the first time we have had a situation like this in Eurasia. People are really interested in it. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurlFF, interview, 2019)

We need to look closely at this. In comparison to previous years, when the audience lost interest in attending the festival and the majority of seats remained vacant, it was noticed that the 2019 festival witnessed far higher demand for free tickets. This was not because tickets were free, given that the EurIFF charged for film screenings only once, in 2015, when it attempted to make the event closer to international standards.⁵⁰

The cost of tickets was set at half the usual for cinemas, and for students it was only ₸100 [£0.20]. All proceeds went to cinemas through the rent of halls. Previously, Eurasia simply bought these halls for budget money. The fact that the entry was free is a fiction, nothing is free. The festival simply used the same taxpayers' money to pay for screenings at steep rates. But the Ministry of Culture and Sport reacted extremely negatively to this initiative and banned the sale of tickets from then on. What considerations it was guided by is a question for them. (Rashid Nugmanov, director of the EurIFF in 2015, interview, 2020)

The above quote reflects the unwillingness by the state to recoup the costs and to profit from the EurIFF, even though the admission price was low. By way of comparison, global festival circuits often provide free admission when they cannot sell a certain amount of tickets. For instance, the Copenhagen festival in 2003 attempted to sell 30,000 tickets, then reduced this figure to 20,000. In the end it sold 15-16,000 tickets and handed out the rest for free (Pederson and Mazza, 2011, p.150).

The Kazakh audience is not ready to pay the entry fee for the festival, according to another interviewee:

The level of our audience is too low. They have gotten used to Hollywood's cheap comedies. The audience should be educated, cultivated. It is one of the goals of the festival. (Kanat Torebay, executive director of the EurIFF, interview, 2019)

What Torebay is implying is that EurIFF officials are afraid of having empty halls. In the past, even with free admission, halls were often only half full. From international examples, although some festivals have additional sources of funding, film screenings do not generate substantial profit for them (de Valck, 2016a). Also, according to Stevens (2016, p.167), "the ability of a festival to train its audience is essential in sustaining the event and assuring its cultural

⁵⁰ All over the world attending festival screenings is free only for accredited guests, everyone else must pay.

legitimacy”. Therefore, it can be said that the EurIFF has a long-term aspiration to establish and maintain the cultural validity of the event and “train its audience” in order to make a profit in future.



Figure 30 Film screenings at the Chaplin Cinema. www.eiff.kz.

Sometimes, even members of the audience who had tickets could not get a seat because the actors had invited so many relatives and friends. This caused some friction, given “the audience is not located outside of these sophisticated relations” (Odabasi, 2018, p.74). One may argue that the organisers did not expect such a big viewership as it had never happened before. The younger generation, and even some producers, had to stand at the entrance and, sometimes, even sit on the floor along the stairwells (see Figure 30). The festival director had to apologise through a video post on the official EurIFF account on Instagram (@eiff.kz), saying that next year they would plan for this better, along with the cinema theatres. Often such negative impacts can be addressed through

“awareness and intervention” (Allen et al., 2002, p.25), such as the festival director achieved here via social media.

Another shortfall of the festival was that films overlapped with press conferences as well as master classes. In this regard, the EurIFF was close to failing to “give more people the opportunity to familiarise themselves with ‘other’ cinemas” (de Valck, 2013, p.105). Clearly, this impacted on the EurIFF audience’s ability to expand, severely restricting the influence of the festival on viewing choice.

On the other hand, audiences and filmmakers have plenty of opportunity to interact at press conferences. Quintin (2009) questions the value of this, noting that the public’s views are often ignored with respect to prize-giving outcomes. But, if we take the example of the press conference with Farkhat Sharipov, director of the Grand Prix winner *The Secret of a Leader*, this is shown only to be partially the case. After he said that he had to cut many exciting episodes due to the time limits, people asked him to publish the original extended version of the movie on YouTube. After the EurIFF he did partially fulfil these requests by making the film available at online cinemas free of charge, though it was not the extended version that had been requested. This is strong evidence that promoting such audience participation can impact on the festival’s aims and objectives, thus supporting the idea that the content of a festival impacts on its organisation (Bosma, 2015). After the screening of *The Secret of a Leader*, festival-goers had the opportunity to ask Sharipov questions and express their opinions. In this way, the spectators had a circumstantial influence on the structure of the festival itself, over time. To this degree, the policy of engaging the audience with filmmakers worked well at the EurIFF.

A lack of statistics significantly inhibits the development of the EurIFF. It was not possible to compare attendance numbers for every year of the festival because the number of festival-goers has not been recorded or presented officially since the inception of the EurIFF. However, according to Kanat Torebay, executive director of EurIFF, the 15th festival has an approximate record of attendance figures of 10,000-12,000 visitors.⁵¹ This data is based on

⁵¹ In the early 2000s, EurIFF, through a directive from universities, forced students to fill the hall when screenings of the Grand Prix film took place.

information from the Chaplin Cinema. Due to the small seating capacities of the cinema halls at the shopping centre, only 70-80 people could watch one movie at a time, so 140-160 people in two separate halls watched films at the same time. According to organisers of the festival, in previous years the event hired three or four cinema theatres but witnessed very low attendance. Not keeping records (including information on gender distribution, age, nationality, country of origin or education) ignores Odabasi's (2018) convincing argument that the festival audience should be closely monitored. Therefore, it was not feasible to track audience demographics (Odabasi, 2018) or to make a comparison of expenditure and income. This reflected a lack of managerial control over the festival and its marketing. Furthermore, the impact of a festival is often measured by evidence-based quantitative measures such as premieres, tickets sold, international audience, and tourist expenditure (Dickson, 2018; Bosma, 2015). This last feature is essential in measuring the economic impact of the festival (Allen et al., 2002) and was not available at the EurIFF. If the quality of the data for marketing decisions is low, this raises the question of adequate marketing (Ibid, p.188). These findings support the earlier argument described in section 4.2.1 on the lack of research and statistical data on Kazakh cinema. The absence of statistical data both on Kazakh cinema and the EurIFF hinders approaches to marketing to fix the problem and plan for the future.

6.2.2 The professional audience

At the Cannes film festival only film professionals are admitted to screenings (Wong, 2011), whereas the EurIFF allows both the general public and professionals access. However, the festival had systems in place, in certain situations, to divide the professional audience from the general public. This was made possible outside of the screening circuit. It was achieved by way of an accreditation system for journalists and other visiting guests which allowed them entry free of charge. Press tickets were distributed very quickly on the first day. One can argue that a gatekeeping mechanism such as this accreditation system played a significant role in audience segregation. Although media representatives did not have any privileges at the opening and closing ceremonies and just sat along with the general public, only journalists had access to closed press conferences, such as with the Turkish actor Burak Özçivit.

It was stated in section 5.3.2 that inviting celebrities to festivals advertises the event and, as a consequence, the country itself. The example of the EurIFF suggests that popularising the event through star power was possible only with the help of mass media, bypassing the audience itself.⁵²

Moreover, press conferences were held immediately after each other at the Rixos President Astana so media representatives and guests could not leave the hotel (see Figure 25). The flow of journalists and guests, which Bosma (2015, p.75) describes as “crowd control”, was monitored by volunteers.

6.2.3 Volunteers

If a festival develops and expands, it will need additional staff recruitment, whether they be paid or volunteers (Allen et al., 2002). Festivals depend very much on the latter (Iordanova, 2009). Often their input, rather than that of paid employees, has become a peculiarity of many cultural events (Derrett, 2004). The 15th EurIFF recruited a considerable amount of “free labour”, as Iordanova (2009, p.35) calls it. It was noted that “pure altruism”, devotion to work (Allen et al., 2002, p.147), and a possible route to professionalisation pushed volunteers to work. The volunteers’ input in the EurIFF was inestimable in terms of administrative work.

⁵² The audience could see the Turkish actor Burak Özçivit only when he arrived and at the closing ceremony.



Figure 31 Volunteers in red T-shirts at the festival. www.eiff.kz.

There is the potential for volunteers to help brand the festival. As Dickson (2018, p.152) reveals, Valletta Film Festival initially attracted the local Maltese people as a valuable source of voluntary labour work. This approach “understood festival branding and volunteer recruitment as mutually supported strategies”, which allowed the event to flourish. However, at the EurIFF, volunteers were sometimes recruited to make up for a deficit of visitors at press conferences, given that journalists and cinephiles were sometimes a minority. When attending the festival, it was noticed that the organisers had chosen students aged between 15 and 17. The moderator called them together and distributed prepared questions to each of them (see Figure 31). They were then instructed on how to ask questions so that attendees would think that their questioners were particularly keen on a particular oeuvre. I kept records of this in my research diary:

Mr Sakulinskiy tried to make the volunteers sit randomly and organised the distribution of at least one question to each of the participants. Organisers wanted to impress the participants and avoid a shameful situation in case any of the participants weren't asked a single question. When the press conference started, the moderator said: "These people gathered here have watched all your films and have some questions."

However, in fact, not one of those sitting had watched their films.
(Research Diary, 4 June 2019)

This situation is not unusual for Kazakhstan. Students are often instructed what question to ask and what not to ask with many rehearsals when government officials pay a visit to major events. It is not known what the guests felt about the artificial, trained questions at the EurIFF, where volunteers served not only as assistants but also as “reserve journalists”. However, sometimes even big festivals can witness the same situation with empty halls with one or two mass media representatives participating (Odabasi, 2018). Moreover, the EurIFF’s experience coincides with Dickson’s (2018, p.161) argument:

Festival volunteer participation is rewarded with more festival participation, which shifts them into a different type of participant - as an audience member. As such, during festival time, volunteers alternate between being festival workers and festival audiences. In the light of the duality, one could argue that the festival volunteer occupies a central position wherein they socially construct different meanings of the festival as both insider/worker and outsider/audience.

Certainly, the volunteers at the EurIFF served as an audience as well, with the potential to act as critics of the festival from two perspectives. However, in reality, the case of the prepared questions shows an explicit manipulation of these formal events. Therefore, in some cases, there was a contrived rather than truthful dialogue between the “audience” and participants. In this respect, the EurIFF’s volunteers did not influence any genuine branding of the festival as in the case of the Valletta festival. It was an unfortunate attempt by the EurIFF officials to try to make up for gaps in the guest audience by way of volunteers, who were drawn in to actively work as the audience for festival participants.

6.2.4 Participants

The event is also designed for participants and the success of the event depends on them (Allen et al., 2002). Because professionals, or film-participants, attend films by colleagues they are also part of the audience. The first thing that this professional audience pointed out was the hospitality and the opportunities available to expand the festival network (see Figure 32):



Figure 32 From left to right: Top, British actor Martin Swabey, French actress Emilie Piponnier. Below, Belorussian director Mitriy Semenov-Aleinikov and Uzbek director Shokir Kholikov. www.eiff.kz.

It is a beautiful experience to be in contact with a culture of which I had previously had no idea. Not only is it the occasion for the people who visit to spread the word about the beautiful country, but it is also the chance for the people of Kazakhstan to have access to a different point of view of the world. (Martin Swabey, British actor, press conference interview, 2019)

This quote shows that the festival is the occasion for a voice to make itself heard around the world not only by way of different people being involved but also through the different films chosen in the festival. In this regard, Rich's (2003-2004, p.158) argument relates to describing the festival as "the place where we can learn how other people think and act and live, how the world is functioning outside our village, how other people speak, what other cultures treasure". However, considering the small number of international visitors to the festival, which is limited to invited filmmakers, other participants, or international jury

members, spreading the word about Kazakhstan to the outside world, in the way Swabey describes, is clearly restricted to a small number of people.

The level of interest of the Kazakh audience was the second thing noted by film professionals: “For me, your audience is perfect. They are genuinely interested in the movie. I really enjoyed this,” said Shokir Kholikov, Uzbek director at the same press conference (see Figure 32). His standpoint was supported by the next speaker:

This is my first visit to Kazakhstan. I really like the level and interest of the viewer in the festival and am very impressed with the programme itself. (Mitriy Semenov-Aleinikov, Belorussian director, press conference interview, 2019)

This quote suggests real interest on the part of the interviewee per contra to the manipulated interest by the volunteers described in the previous section. Although, the interest of Kazakh spectators in theatres was high enough compared to previous years, supporting the argument that the culture of cinephilia is maintained by the audience (Wong, 2011), the film professionals might not know that much of the audience at the press conferences had been trained to ask questions in advance and may not have even watched the films they were asking questions about. Secondly, the range of films the Kazakh audience could watch was limited, as stated previously, due to lack of repeated screenings.

Other participants suggested that the festival had triggered an interest in Kazakhstan in general, expressing a desire to see more of the country after the festival:

The festival has completely changed my mind about Kazakhstan. Honestly, I didn't know anything about Kazakhstan, but now I know that Kazakhstan is a modern country and tries to continually improve. It is the way for other people to know about your country. This festival is so friendly. You have a great festival. It is so real, you know. (Mirabbas Khosravinezhad, Iranian director, interview, 2019)

Festivals, indeed, provide “authenticity and uniqueness” (Derrett, 2004, pp.32-33), something that is picked up by visitors. In this case, the emotional impact and testimony of the participant may express their degree of satisfaction with the event. Richins (1997) advocates the role of feelings in consumers’ decision-making. If one considers the participants as festival’s consumers, then it is

possible that visitors would boost the number and quality of the films. This, in turn, may develop festival-inspired tourism. However, the limited number of tickets, as was the case in 2019, may reduce consumers' satisfaction.

Park et al. (2011) identify five factors for measuring the service quality at film festivals: responsiveness, additional facilities, quality of facilities, programming, and approachability. Khosravinezhad's comment suggests that the participants were satisfied with responsiveness, the programme and accessibility. Moreover, all these observations indicate that the festival could shape the understanding of Kazakhstan. In addition, the above quote supports Brubaker's (1996, p.7) argument (see section 2.1) that a country "structures perception". In this regard, EurlFF contributed to raising awareness about Kazakhstan.

The interviewee's comment also suggests that the film event, despite all the challenges listed in this chapter, could "enhance image creation" (Martínez-Ruiz, et al., 2011, n.p.). If, for instance, we compare the EurlFF with Gdynia Film Festival (GFF) in post-communist Poland, that event offers an efficient means of promoting Polish cinema. As Cudny (2018) points out, the Polish cinema industry could not function well without the Gdynia festival. Moreover, the festival is one of Gdynia's three cultural brands along with the Music Theatre and Poland's Open'er Festival. In Kazakhstan's case, though, as argued previously in Chapter 5, the EurlFF is still not the brand of Nur-Sultan, or vice-versa. Yet, in spite of this, it is important to emphasise that Kazakh cinema and the EurlFF are very much in need of each other.

Khosravinezhad continues:

I found a new audience for my short films. It is so crucial for Kazakh people to watch my films and for me to watch Kazakh films. We have the same stories as the Kazakh nation. I think that this festival, as the biggest festival in Asia, may be considered an A-class festival. (Mirabbas Khosravinezhad, Iranian director, interview, 2019)

Indeed, the beliefs of Tengriism (see section 2.2.3), the pre-Islamic religion, consisting of shamanism, sky and ancestry worship are historically mutual held in

both countries (Abikeyeva, 2006).⁵³ These films could develop religion-based films, according to Isaacs (2018) classification.

Also, this quote suggests that EurlFF can be a social constructor, connecting the history of two nations, fulfilling the idea of Eurasianism and the concept of the festival itself. Here, Lee's view (2016, p.172) is pertinent. Events organised by the festivals build social connections between participants and festival officials. The latter may encourage further creative cooperation and bring the same participants back to the EurlFF, a possible outcome which is certainly an advantage. In spite of this, the ambitious aim of entering the A-list looks unattainable at the moment. Iordanova (2006, p.28) sums up it best when she describes the FIAPF's regulations:

The FIAPF operates a film festival franchise of sorts: it allocates territories to film festivals around the world (no more than one festival per country and no more than two A-festivals per region). It also makes sure there is no overlap in the dates of A-festivals. [...] It should not specialize but should cover all aspects of filmmaking; a feature competition with at least fourteen films without genre limitations is a requirement.

The EurlFF meets the criterion of no genre limitations. Yet it may be assumed that the event will not accept, for example, LGBT-related movies due to the way they conflict with a Kazakh conservative mentality. Accepting this genre would generate a scandalous conflict with the Ministry of Culture and Sport as well as wider society, which would see it as EurlFF propaganda for LGBT issues. Furthermore, given the state's manipulation of venues and dates, it is highly unlikely that the festival will lay claim to the FIAPF's A-category any time soon.

Summing up the types of festival-goers using de Valck's (2007) definition is useful for our conclusions here. She distinguishes six types of cinephiles based on visiting several film festivals over the years: 1) the lone list-maker, who carefully researches ahead to decide on films to watch; 2) the highlight seeker, who follows others' advice to ensure seeing the films most generally recognised; 3) the specialist, avoiding the mainstream; 4) the leisure visitor, who just comes to escape and relax; 5) the social tourist, looking for human interaction;

⁵³ For example, the concept of ancestor worship can be seen in the Iranian film *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1989) by Bahram Beizai (Abikeyeva, 2006).

6) the volunteer, working free of charge to get experience. As we can see from the previous analysis, only the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth categories can be found at the EurIFF. If the festival is small, the audience is restricted to certain types of festival visitor (de Valck, 2007). Cinephiles across the world rarely visit the EurIFF if their travel costs are not covered.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the programme and audience engagement at a state-run EurIFF as well as their impact on the nation building of Kazakhstan. The chapter addressed my second research question: “To what extent does the EurIFF contribute to nation building and the projection of national identity?”

The EurIFF, as a Central Asian regional showcase, organised the programme with enthusiasm. The festival benefited from the rich experience of a foreign programmer, who left her own signature on the 15th EurIFF. Following the experience of countries with strong filmmaking traditions, a team led by a foreign curator managed to select the best films of 2018-19 for its audience without being restrained by any censorship. Domestic curatorial practice intersected with international. However, the event attracted low numbers of applications compared to previous years, even though the only rule for filmmakers was geographical belonging. The reason for that was, again, late funding by the government, as described in Chapter 5.

Although this festival was criticised in the past for being too focused on giving prizes to its guests, the 15th EurIFF international jury members, who were invited and appointed rather than selected, worked fairly to avoid political issues. Despite this, it is still clear that the judgments were very much subjective, as in any other film competition event.

The 15th EurIFF brought together different categories of an audience from film professionals to the general public and volunteers. The interaction of the audience and the festival was challenged by the low capacity of only two cinema theatres and a lack of repeat screenings. Secondly, the overlap between screenings, master classes and press conferences split the visitors between the

two venues. Consequently, only a small portion of the film-viewing community, including local cinephiles, could watch the bulk of the films, which covered a wide range of genres. There is a specialised film audience emerging in Kazakhstan, although it is very small and demographic data is not available.

Despite low attendance, the 15th EurlIFF witnessed fully booked cinema theatres for the first time in its history. The free ticketing system had not attracted cinephiles to previous festivals but EurlIFF officials treated it as one of the festival's achievements. However, one of the major drawbacks is that the event failed to be a real audience-driven event and to focus outwards to appeal to an international audience. It catered to the needs of mainly local audiences except for invited foreign film professionals and speakers. Moreover, the lack of a marketing approach meant they did not prioritise obtaining data on the makeup of the audience, which, in turn, impacts on the overall development of the event. If the EurlIFF is not fully able to connect its films as products with its audience, it is fair to conclude that the contribution of the EurlIFF to the nation building of Kazakhstan is limited. I have argued that, to date, at best, the EurlIFF has only had a minor image making effect on Kazakhstan.

The EurlIFF will find wider dissemination and might be able to reach a broad international coverage if it achieves financial stability and is able to move to a more autonomous, well-established management with no dependency on the state. Only then will the number of festival-goers be able to grow and for it to become an international image-making festival.

The focus now will shift to the industry element of the EurlIFF and to Kazakh film policy, where it will explore the impact of co-production, tax rebates in production and cooperation with international producers.

7 National or international? The industry and Kazakh cinema

Introduction

The previous chapter shed light on programming, curation, and the audience of the EurIFF as the main elements in building the image of the festival. This final findings chapter will attempt to do two things at the same time. Given that the industry component of Kazakh cinema can be seen at both the level of the state's film policy and that of the EurIFF, it will, first, respond to the third research question - What is the role of Kazakh cinema in nation building? - and, secondly, it will also address aspects of the second research question - To what extent does the EurIFF contribute to nation building?

To answer these questions, I will explore the role of the stakeholder, the SCSNC, the established institute in selecting the projects for state funding, in supporting the film industry. Also, great emphasis will be placed on the new tax incentives scheme and its possible implications for Kazakh cinema. By focusing on these elements as an ideal case of cultural policy analysis, I will argue that collaboration with Hollywood and co-production projects with other countries may expand the distribution of Kazakh films abroad, but with limited profits for Kazakhstan.

7.1 The industry element of EurIFF

Given that the film industry is so central to all elements of cinema, one simply cannot ignore it when studying the way film festivals function within the film festival circuit. As Loist (2016, p.60) puts it, “[The] film festival circuit’ is foremost an industry term, which is versatile, contingent, and rational”. Since the establishment of le Marché at Cannes in 1959, festivals have been a dynamic, primary element of the film industry (de Valck, 2007). Global markets from Berlin and Cannes to Hong-Kong have enabled foreign films to circulate in different cities (Koehler, 2009). Therefore, film festivals can be considered a significant gathering for the industry's business representatives, including sales agents, distributors and producers as well as being specific environments and substantial hubs for universal film industries (Wong, 2011; Bosma, 2015). What is

more, film festivals act as a bridge between art and commerce (Mezias et al., 2008). All in all, festivals provide great marketing options for the film industry and the city (Martínez-Ruiz et al., 2011, p.1952), thus contributing to the country's image. So, exploring the extent to which the industry components of the festival contribute to image building is essential.

According to Rosenbaum (2009), some festivals promote film viewing, while others mainly contribute to selling films. Global European festivals have both features. Unlike festivals with strong business agendas (Cannes, Berlinale, Venice), the EurlFF has always endeavoured to build trust as a business-making festival and one that can attract international attention. Specific evidence of this was reflected in 2017. For the first time in its history the EurlFF launched the Eurasia Film Market. Initiated by director Rashid Nugmanov, film traders from 60 foreign countries were invited, including the CIS, along with countries from the East such as China, India, and South Korea - and Europe and America in the West. A further 100 domestic companies participated free of charge (Forbes, 2017). Unfortunately, these figures declined in 2018 with only 30 foreign distributors and 40 Kazakhstani film companies attending (Tengrinews, 2018). It was even worse in 2019, given the 15th EurlFF did not hold a Eurasia Film Market at all because the new leadership had different priorities. Although round-tables, discussions and press conferences conducted by local and international film figures, as well as practitioners related to the film industry, were beneficial for Kazakhstan, no data on films sold as a result of this are available. This contradicts the argument, made by Grunwell and Steve (2008, n.p.), that for a festival to start working as a business platform it is essential to create a presence in the film industry and design a "strategic niche" that singles it out from others. Thus, though the EurlFF is the biggest cinema forum in Central Asia, it is too early to measure its success in establishing a strong film market community within its circuit beyond its success to date in establishing strong networks.

Comparisons can be made with a couple of international examples from post-colonial countries. The Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) in Tanzania, launched just one year earlier than EurlFF, in 1997, built its own Soko-Film market in 2007. It not only exhibits films, but also provides networking

opportunities to improve the industry in West Africa (Slocum, 2009 p.146). Thus, an official film market emerged at the ZIFF after 10 years of existence. By way of contrast, the Lima Film Festival in Peru has never aimed for a “market place”, but rather promotes the participation of guests, which includes producers, agents, and distributors outside Latin America (Barrow, 2016, p.144). Like Zanzibar, the EurIFF, only launched its first market platform after almost a decade in existence, but failed subsequently to sustain it and, like the Lima Film Festival, limited its degree of industry promotion to master-classes, round-tables, conferences, and film pitches.

7.1.1 The pitching of international projects

In order to more widely disseminate films, festival platforms are often used for film pitches. Eurasia Spotlight,⁵⁴ a producer-initiated film-business platform to support young filmmakers through the pitching of projects, was launched for the first time in 2011 and existed for only five years as part of the EurIFF. One of the co-founders revealed:

There has always been a problem. Eurasia Spotlight was tied to the Eurasia Film Festival but there has been no stability or continuity sustained year on year. This is due to the fact that there has been no regular festival directorate. And the management itself is, likewise, constantly changing. And when the leadership is changed, the festival programme is also changed. So, it is all down to these human factors. (Ilyas Akhmet, producer, telephone interview, 2020)

Another problem that prevents the creation of a genuine market is the fact that both the Eurasia Film Market and Eurasia Spotlight, which called themselves a film market, are, in fact, separate organisations with different leaderships, working in conjunction with the EurIFF. This means that everything is dependent on the annually changing leadership of the EurIFF, which may not include them in its new programme. Secondly, if the funding of the EurIFF is reduced, as in 2019 (see the section 5.3.2), it then becomes increasingly likely that Eurasia Spotlight does not take place.

⁵⁴ An unofficial, non-profit organisation founded by Ilyas Akhmet and Anna Kachko.

The Eurasia Spotlight was effective when it started, due to the support of JSC Kazakhfilm, when it funded winners. For instance, the film *Harmony Lessons* by the young director Emir Baigazin was chosen as the best Kazakh project for the first time in 2011 (Smith, 2012). It was produced in collaboration with Germany and France and later won a Silver Bear at the Berlinale 2013 for its camera work (www.berlinale.de). Reviewed by *Hollywood Reporter* as “Grimly poetic, formally disciplined and psychologically gripping” (Rooney, 2013, n.p.), *Harmony Lessons* tells the story of a 13-year-old boy called Aslan who is bullied at school and who lives in the village with his grandmother. This humiliation helps to feed Aslan’s submerged personality disorders, and he takes his vengeance out on insects. His mental disorder pushes him to kill a bully called Bolat. Aslan and his friend Mirsaiyn are placed under investigation. Here, the director Emir Baygazin portrays the confrontation between the individual and society. The film picked up some twenty awards all over the world, including six Grand-Prix at São Paulo, Geneva, Lausanne, Basel, Angers, and Seattle (Kazakhfilm, 2019a).⁵⁵ This offered strong evidence of what can be achieved with adequate support. Later, when funding was limited, Eurasia Spotlight did not offer financial aid, but it did help filmmakers with things such as post-production at studios or internship trips to the one of the oldest film universities in Europe - the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) (Brod.kz, 2017). From all this, it is clear that regular pitching sessions and stronger financial support would enable more Kazakh films to bear fruit.

In 2019, instead of Eurasia Spotlight, the SCSNC, in collaboration with the EurlFF, held an international pitching session to open doors for Kazakh films into the distribution market. The SCSNC registered more than thirty projects for pitching aimed at co-production with foreign companies. Out of this thirty, only nineteen promising projects participated in the pitching: thirteen feature films, five animations and one documentary (see Figure 33). However, the SCSNC only announced the information about pitching sessions and its deadlines twelve days ahead of the festival dates (Kazakh Cinema, 2019).

⁵⁵ The Eurasia Spotlight entry in 2011, *Owners*, participated in the main competition in Cannes in 2014. The Eurasia Spotlight entry *Adventure*, in 2011 (Kazakhstan-France co-production), presented in Karlovy Vary Film Festival’s main competition in 2014. Also, the 2015 entry, *Walnut Tree*, won First Prize in the New Currents at Busan International Film Festival in 2016 (EurlFF 2017a).



Figure 33 The participant Maira Karsakbayeva defending a project at the pitching session at the 15th EurlFF, Nur-Sultan. www.eiff.kz.

The panel was comprised of the Head of the Kyrgyzfilm National Film Studio Aibek Dzhangaziev (Kyrgyzstan), the Head of Uzbekfilm Fatih Jalalov (Uzbekistan), the Head of the Sakhafilm Studio Dmitry Shadrin (Russia), the Head of the Belarusfilm National Film Studio Vladimir Karachevsky (Belarus), the GFM Production Studio President Giorgi Kharebawa (Georgia), and the producer Ivan Lopatin (Russia) (see Figure 34). The first question that arises is why the SCSNC only drew on leaders of film studios from the post-Soviet countries as jury members? This was the response:

Because we realise that we share a single history in many aspects. Our common stories can thus be filmed jointly with the various film studios. They [jury members] did not have the right to vote. This was firstly, because they are guests and secondly, because we just wanted to attract them to see if they would see something interesting in those projects. (Andrey Khazbulatov, chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, interview, 2019)

This supports Wong's (2011) statement that the festival and its markets are spaces for networking where professionals can express their particular interest in a project. Secondly, it is essential for the leadership of the studios as the international film community, as de Valck (2007, p.109) puts it, to "to join

forces”. Vibrant festivals offer this opportunity and can attract different parties to one place (Ibid). Hence, the EurIFF could be the right place to develop cooperation within the film industry.



Figure 34 Six international jurors at a pitching session. www.eiff.kz.

On the other hand, as de Valck (2007, p.73) argues, festivals can use marketing strategies “to secure a ‘festival image’ for themselves that will effectively position the festival both globally and locally”. It was in this way that the EurIFF used the pitching session as a marketing strategy and placed itself as local and global at the same time. So, evaluation of the Kazakh film projects by CEOs of international film studios may start the process of teaming up with pitching participants, which would make the EurIFF become the centre of the Central Asian film market.

The pitching of international projects revealed several urgent issues in Kazakh film policy. It has become obvious that the EurIFF as a film market cannot compete with its local counterpart - the Almaty Film Festival. The EurIFF does not have separate funding for projects, but rather the session was SCSNC-run. Nor did it provide filmmakers with internships and post-production schemes as Eurasia Spotlight had in the past. This feature indicates the limits of Wong’s (2011, p.148) argument that “festivals help to provide funds, either from the

festivals, or other agencies that use the festival to distribute these funds”. Therefore, one may argue that the SCSNC used the EurIFF as a pitching platform with ready international jurors, resources (time and space) and the audience to choose the best projects (Druzhinina, 2017), continuing the traditions of the Eurasia Spotlight platform. To compare, co-production markets at A-list festivals such as Cannes have funds to aid standing projects. As Bosma (2015) puts it, the festival has to have a demand for a co-production fund. By contrast, Kazakhstan’s two-year-old Almaty film festival has funding for new projects, including co-production. Although the festival was opened in 2018, the same year it funded a criminal drama *A Dark-Dark Man*⁵⁶ by the Kazakh director Adilkhon Yerzhanov, which was produced by the Astana Film Fund (Kazakhstan), Short Brothers (Kazakhstan) and Arizona Productions (France). Lack of funding for projects at the EurIFF has implications for film policy. Firstly, the Almaty Film Festival as an event with a stronger marketing approach and far more skills in funding projects may become more popular than the EurIFF in the near future. What is more, the appointment of the general producer of the Almaty Film Festival as a deputy chairman of SCSNC (Brod.kz, 2020) in August 2020 may increase the status of the Almaty film festival.

The second issue observed at the festival was its failure to capitalise on international funding.⁵⁷ Already-negotiated distribution deals did not help to win state aid. For example, the project *Goddess of Fortune* did not pass, despite the fact that it already had €1.5 million financing (50 per cent out of a total budget of €3 million) (£1,357,425 or \$1,823,565) from Italy, with a 100 per cent distribution deal in the Italian peninsula. As Falicov (2017, p.89) argues, a filmmaker’s goal is not only to obtain funds but also, in signing a distribution deal, “to enable it to circulate in movie theatres or film festivals worldwide, in the best-case scenario”. It was the only film in this session that had an agreement with Netflix. According to producer M. Karsakbayeva’s estimation,

⁵⁶ A-category San Sebastian International Film Festival presented the world premiere in September 2019. The film tells the story of a typical investigation of a murder in a village. The detective wants to complete the investigation as quickly as possible because they have already found the ‘guilty’ person. But when a journalist comes to this village from the city, the plan falls apart (www.adilkhanyerzhanov.com).

⁵⁷ The international participants at the EurIFF were few. Only the animation *Opportunity* by Zhanna Bekmambetova (Russia), the feature films *Kok Boz At [A Steed]* (Tatarstan, Russia) and *Goddess of Fortune* (Italy) applied as international projects seeking Kazakh support. In contrast, other projects were from Kazakhstan, with co-production agreements with foreign companies.

this film would have grossed €7 million (£6,334,650 or \$8,510,000). None of the Kazakh films had been viewed on the Netflix platform before. In this case, even a previously signed contract with one of the biggest media providers in the world did not help the project get funding from the Kazakh government. In this case, the SCSNC contradicted its first and foremost aim stated in article 14 of the Cinema Law: “promoting national film abroad”. The answer to why this film could not secure state aid can be presumptive. SCSNC provided funding only for those projects that participated in the official, national pitching sessions, whereas Karsakbayeva’s film took part only in the pitching within EurlFF, which was not official.

Analysing the international jurors’ approach to selecting the best projects shows it to be radically different from its counterparts worldwide. The Hubert Bal fund, drawing on more standard criteria such as the country of production, nationality, gender, and the practicability of the project both financially and artistically, seeks to achieve “artistic quality and film authenticity”, not to mention looking at the extent to which the project can boost the local film environment (Falicov, 2017, p.88). In response to this, one of the current jury members said:

The main criterion is a professional and measured approach to everything. They should answer to the question as to why they are shooting the movie and for whom? What will it give to Kazakhstan? Budget is not the most critical criterion. (Vladimir Karachevskiy, CEO of National Film Studio “Belarusfilm”, interview, 2019)

This respondent’s view coincides with Falicov’s (2017) argument that by working collaboratively all those film professionals have an input on what aspects are valuable for each state’s particular needs. Thus, participation in pitching sessions can shape the form of the film festival, where these issues are covered.

As long as the purpose of the SCSNC was to make world filmmakers reflect on the thematic relevance to Kazakhstan, then ‘What will it give to Kazakhstan?’ was always the central query in the pitching. This signals that the national dimension of the process was of key importance. Karachevskiy went on to further endorse this view:

I think the significant advantage is that it [pitching] happened very democratically, very openly, naturally, without bureaucracy. I honestly admit that I want to implement exactly the same experience in my country that I got at this festival. (Vladimir Karachevskiy, CEO of the National Film Studio “Belarusfilm”, interview, 2019)

Although he is reminding us of the requirements of the conditions of a good pitch, he had no idea that the jurors’ decision would play no significant role in the allocation of funds. As long as it was not the primary criterion, the pitching would remain nothing more than a kind of a sandpit to perform projects and present to jurors how diverse the Kazakh film genre is with hopes for future collaboration. Only three projects out of the nineteen performed at the EurIFF received a favourable decision: *Life* by Emir Baigazin, *A Poet* by Darezhan Omirbayev, and *Educate Ademoka* by Adilkhan Yerzhanov (P. Aldibekova, personal communication, 11 October 2019).⁵⁸ The inter-agency commission (see section 4.2.2.) made the final decision about financing based on the results of SCSNC’s national pitching session held in June 2019, where the three above-mentioned projects were presented. The international jurors’ decision at the EurIFF was similar to recommendations given by the EC at the national pitching sessions of the SCSNC, which have only an advisory role (see the section 4.2.3). Both cases show that when it comes to funding issues, the outcome of the pitching, whether it is with local EC members or international jurors, has no standing.

One major issue noted at the EurIFF, and at the pitching of projects in particular, is language. Kazakh-speaking participants, who are not fluent in Russian, had to defend their projects in Russian (in general, the working language of the festival was Russian). This is a problem for all pitching sessions held by the SCSNC, where most of the Expert Council’s members are Russian-speaking (see Appendices B and C) and some of them had to rely on colleagues to interpret the pitches. This is also a problem for all Kazakh films. Filmmakers choose Russian in order to reach more of the population and so recoup costs and make profits. Moreover, Western distributors circulate films dubbed into Russian in all CIS countries. However, activists on social media criticised the SCSNC for infringing the rights of the Kazakh language. The SCSNC, whose leadership is also

⁵⁸ Alongside the other 15 projects from an earlier local pitching session held in Almaty in June 2019.

Russian-speaking, replied that an attempt to discriminate against members of the EC who do not speak Kazakh is contrary to the Constitution of the RK, where the Russian language has the status of an official language. What is more, the SCSNC received 26 applications out of 222 in the Kazakh state language, which is slightly more than 10 per cent in total (Kazakh Cinema, 2020c). Here, one can see the clash of two identities in bilingual Kazakhstan. This supports Wimmer's (2015) argument given in section 2.1 that if the language environment is diverse in the country, the nation-building process is not enhanced. If language is an ethnic symbol that shapes national identity, cinematic nation building is being created in Kazakhstan through the ex-colonial Russian language, which makes for a form of nation building that splits into two.

Along with the above challenge, film market priorities at Eurasia are only realised when the festival officials sign an agreement with international producers.

7.1.2 International producers

Film festivals shape culture and commerce. Festivals have always cooperated with the film industry by giving them a unique space to meet and negotiate (Loist, 2016), and, above all, film festivals are popular within the film industry for two reasons. Festivals are needed to circumvent the American hegemony within the market. Secondly, the event functions as a point of contact for film professionals. These markets are not limited to the festival programme, and they are attractive to film professionals from Hollywood and other countries (de Valck, 2007). The 15th EurIFF was no different in this respect. The festival served to strengthen the bonds between the significant and dominant player, Hollywood, and the incipient Kazakh film market.



Figure 35 From left to right: Georgina Surtees (Discovery, England), Rick Smotkin (The Third Circle, the USA), Julian Grimmond (Global Film Solutions, New Zealand), and Simona Roman Bhrlukova (Polite Rottweiler, the USA). Photo taken by the author.

The EurIFF and SCSNC's substantial step into the international market was the invitation of Western producers for the first time. Filmmakers from LIONSGATE, NBS Universal, Warner Horizon, Discovery, and Global Film Solutions (see Figure 35) within the framework of the EurIFF had a familiarisation tour in three locations of Kazakhstan: the Almaty region in the South, the Mangystau region in the West, and the capital Nur-Sultan. If producers, alongside sales agents and distributors became essential players in the film festival market (Wong, 2011), trying to choose the best film locations, the 15th EurIFF could then see itself as having market-oriented elements. The SCSNC, acting as the national film commission institute of Kazakhstan, was involved in this attempt to attract filmmakers for the purpose of promoting prospective film locations (Wong, 2011). One of the visiting producers revealed:

I think the fascinating thing about Kazakhstan from a production perspective is how complete and how full the ecosystem and landscape are; they are extraordinary. People are the palette of that landscape, taking into account the talents that I've seen in music, in arts. It gives us a whole spectrum of activity. It is a vibrant and really exciting industry you have here, which I think the world would be so pleased to see. Hollywood looks for places with contrasts. I've just seen that every single minute, every single hour that I've been here. (Julian Grimmond,

managing director of Global Film Solutions, press conference interview, 2019)

The ecosystem and landscape in Kazakhstan are unique. However, the infrastructure adjacent to these perfect film locations may complicate the shooting process. For example, this happened during the filming of *Marco Polo*, an American streaming TV series, in Kazakhstan in 2014.⁵⁹ According to Akhat Ibrayev, Kazakhstani line producer, it was difficult to arrange visits to film locations for 400 people (including 135 foreigners); because of the large number of participants, they had to stay in different hotels. However, despite the challenges, the Kazakh side could organise the filming just in 22 days (Prokopenko, 2014). Also, the most beautiful places within the country are located far from the cities, which can add additional issues of commuting. Only \$700,000 (£520,852) were spent on transport, customs, and logistics costs. The same amount was spent for food and accommodation for foreign and local film crews (Suleimenova, 2014). In addition, Michael Hurd, producer of *Marco Polo*, revealed that the choice of Kazakhstan as a film location was not accidental. He came several times to participate in the Eurasia film festival and was amazed, like the informant Julian Grimmond, by the variety of natural landscapes - forests, steppes, mountains, and deserts (Ibid). This example implies that filming the *Marco Polo* series in Kazakhstan happened thanks to the participation of the producer in EurIFF, which shows a successful practical application of the festival.

The interviewee Julian Grimmond's view here coincides with something that Goldsmith (2015) notes, and which I will look at in more detail in the next section. He differentiates two main strategies of location marketing: low cost by way of tax incentives, and product differentiation. However, the distinctiveness of the location is not necessarily an essential selling point, because the film location is not typically advertised in terms of its distinguishing qualities, but in terms of its acting as a cheaper replacement for a similar location elsewhere. If

⁵⁹ *Marco Polo* is TV series about the Italian traveller and merchant. He lived for 17 years in the Kublaikhan khanate in Mongolia and wrote the diaries about the Turkic-speaking tribes in Central Asia. The series was ordered by Netflix and produced by brothers Harvey and Bob Weinstein, founders of Miramax and the Weinstein company studios. The first season partly was shot in Kazakhstan (Suleimenova, 2014), where the stuntmen from Kazakhstani Nomad Stunts International Action company participated and continued to work on the next location in Malaysia (www.nomadstunts.com).

Hollywood and the festivals are symbiotic (Wong, 2011), then the EurlIFF may have opportunities to raise its profile via this relationship with the Hollywood market. As argued by Elsaesser (2005, pp.38-39), national cinema cannot live without Hollywood:

Yet paradoxically, a national cinema is precisely something which relies for its existence on a national exhibition sector at least as much as it does on a national production sector. Without Hollywood, no national exhibition sector, [that is] without a national exhibition sector, i.e., cinemas, whether privately run or state-subsidised prepared to show independent releases, you cannot have a national cinema.

Indeed, even a prominent festival like Cannes requires cooperation with Hollywood to win legitimacy (Jungen, 2014). Moreover, the success of the first European film festivals has advanced due to their relationship with Hollywood, along with importing many of its techniques to strengthen their profile (de Valck, 2007). If Kazakhstan enhances cooperation with invited companies, the festival circuit of the EurlIFF may become an essential interface with Hollywood (Elsaesser, 2013). In other words, the EurlIFF, by offering an opportunity for targeted film professionals, is building up strong networking for future collaboration (Martínez-Ruiz et al, 2011). Examining the Transylvania film festival in Romania, Sălcudean (2017, p.207) deduces that “opening to the outside, partnerships and networking, can channel nationalism in creating cultural country branding”. So, if one is successful in establishing connections with producers worldwide, then one is creating a unique opportunity for a netfilm market to brand Kazakhstan. On the other hand, let us recall Schlesinger’s (2000 p.26) argument (see section 2.1) regarding American superiority. He states that local markets cannot see American films as “other” because of their popularity and growth. Thus, with increased collaboration with Western companies, Hollywood, in particular, may be another threat to Kazakh national cinema.

One of the substantial novelties that attracts the foreign film industry to Kazakhstan is the availability of tax rebates.

7.2 Rebates and tax incentives

As argued by Vitali and Willemen (2006, p.2), “the developmental engine of the cinema is driven by industrial, rather than cultural forces”. One industrial engine in filmmaking is tax breaks. Tax incentives began in North America in 1997, when the Canadian government decided to attract money for the film industry (Stephens, 2018). With similar schemes, Europe and the USA offer three different kinds of film production incentives: tax rebates, tax credits, and grants. If tax credits are a type of investment that diminishes the amount of the investor’s taxable income, a tax grant is calculated as a share of the production expenses and is based on the film’s production costs. Although it is similar to the grant model, the tax rebate offers a tax refund based on production costs during the shooting process (Castendyk, 2018). Following these examples, the Cinema Law (2019) in Kazakhstan aimed to open up new possibilities for integrating the film industry of the country with the world cinema community:

Our task is to attract foreign investment. This is just what a [tax] rebate allows. Over time, this will enable both small and large-scale events to be filmed here in Kazakhstan. We strive for an international level. We strive to get international rental. (Andrey Khazbulatov, chairman of the Board of the SCSNC, interview, 2019)

Khazbulatov’s argument is about tax rebates. But the claim to internationalise is undermined by the failure to secure agreement for even one film with Netflix (see section 7.1.1). How can Kazakhstan see itself as striving for an international scale if it does not give a chance to producers who have rich experience in film promotion?

Kazakhstan is following the Cinema Law’s well-trodden path by introducing a tax rebate that is up to 30 per cent of local costs, with the filmmaker spending at least 130,000 monthly accounting indices (MAI),⁶⁰ which is ₸379,210,000 (£670,747 or \$901,450) at January 2021 rates. Kazakhstan was ahead of Russia and the whole of the Central Asian region in introducing tax incentives for the first time. To compare, Russia announced tax rebates for foreign film productions only at the end of 2019 (Kozlov, 2019), although it adopted the

⁶⁰ The MAI is an index that is used in Kazakhstan to calculate fines, pensions, social benefits. From January 2021, one MAI in Kazakhstan reached ₸2,917, which is around £5.

Cinema Law in 1996 (Van Gorp, 2011). The Russian programme of tax rebates can be considered as disrupted because the only candidate, the Chinese film *Adventure ZQ*, received a negative resolution from the Russian Expert Council. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia did not have any other films that applied for cash rebates in 2020 (Chachelov, 2020). Per contra, Kazakhstan's Expert Council approved two co-productions in 2020 (see section 4.2.3): *Oliara [Off-season]*, the first Hungarian-Kazakhstani film about the famine in the 1930s (see section 2.2); and *Kok Boz At [A Steed]*, a Kazakhstan-Tatarstan project (Kazakh Cinema, 2019). In doing so, the country has created the possibility of becoming a "film-friendly" (Goldsmith, 2015, p.179) country, which, in turn, would allow them to compete against other external film promoters.

This scheme may reshape the film industry, as it did in the UK with the introduction of tax incentives in 1992 (Newsinger and Presence, 2018). The fiscal incentives were updated by a further tax relief, introduced by New Labour in 1997. Both systems worked in the UK until 2004, when the new Film Tax Credit (FTC) replaced the "dual-clause system". This last can be classed as cultural nationalism versus economic intervention with respect to film policy (Magor and Schlesinger, 2009, p.300). Furthermore, the primary beneficiaries of the tax benefits in Great Britain are mainly the Hollywood majors (Newsinger and Presence, 2018, p.450). It is worth noting that with a population of 18 million in Kazakhstan, the film expenses are not justified if it is to spend more than \$300,000-\$500,000 (nearly £226,850-£378,000) for one film. Hence, low-budget Kazakh films are doomed to failure in the world market. Nevertheless, tax breaks, which may open up new opportunities to produce world-class films with foreign investment and worldwide circulation, prepare the ground for greater competition with respect to Kazakhstani film products. As such, the impact of Kazakh films in building the national image may increase.

Tax incentives have one more advantage in that they may develop film-induced tourism. Alexander Shapiro, who previously worked at Warner Brothers Studio

for 12 years and is CEO of the QED International Covert Media,⁶¹ which launches big-name movies, speculated about the profits for Kazakhstan after tax reliefs:

We did *Harry Potter* in Great Britain, and now people go there to see where *Harry Potter* was shot. The attraction of film projects will increase profitability, above all through the attractiveness of the country; everyone will know what Kazakhstan is. Today, few people understand what is really here. Secondly, the country's revenue from attracting tourists will increase. (Alexander Shapiro, CEO of the QED International Covert Media, press conference interview, 2019)

These views found other international support:

The rebate is extraordinarily vital to push Kazakhstan's competitiveness in the market- place. If you can imagine projects as a commodity [...], you then have a landscape where business can happen along with creativity. There are amazing tourism opportunities here. (Julian Grimmond, managing director of Global Film Solutions, press conference interview, 2019)

Indeed, Kazakhstan's spectacular locations attracted the filmmakers even before the Cinema Law (2019) with tax rebates. Kazakhstan earned \$4 million (£2,976,300) for the organisation of the *Marco Polo* series described earlier in this section (Suleimenova, 2014). This is a clear example of business intersecting with creativity. Also, the above quotes support the argument (Beeton, 2016; Busby et al, 2013; Gupta et al, 2018) that cinema can attract investment from tourism. However, these tax preferences can cause unfavourable conditions for Kazakhstan. The country's film policy cannot just simply be an economic incentive to attract foreign investment; it must also develop the country's own film culture. International companies might just come to use Kazakhstani fiscal incentives to access loopholes in the law and reduce their filming costs. It is not clear whose benefits will weigh more on the scales.

From an international perspective, film-induced tourism to locations enables tourists to travel to the location of a particular film. The above quotes suggest that because of its films - as the *Borat* film did - Kazakhstan might more readily be seen as a safe place to visit by potential tourists (see the section 2.6.3). As a

⁶¹ This company launched *Fury* (2014) with Brad Pitt, *Dirty Grandpa* (2016) with Robert De Niro, *Sabotage* (2014) with Arnold Schwarzenegger and many other films with famous film stars.

consequence, film production could benefit from investment in the local economy by way of film-induced tourism. This was seen in the case of *The Hobbit* which triggered an increased interest in tourists visiting New Zealand. The country, instead of wasting money on marketing campaigns that are aimed at tourists, tends to think that top films “can themselves provide a cost-effective way to market the brand ‘New Zealand’ internationally more successfully” (Ferrer-Roca, 2018, p.396). Also, it may be argued that Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House in Australia have achieved popularity through the impact of films (Beeton, 2016). Accordingly, for Kazakhstan, tax breaks could be designed to attract the film world’s attention.

The SCSNC is making steps towards supporting film-induced tourism in Kazakhstan. When it participated in the SCSNC at the 70th Berlinale in 2020 it gained entry into the AFCl,⁶² the International Association of Film Commissions (Kazakh Cinema, 2020d). This may help Kazakhstan to position itself on the world map as well as possibly attracting Hollywood stars to be filmed in the country’s spectacular locations (see Figure 36). This supports Dinnie’s (2016, p.115) view that one of the main challenges of nation branding is how to “position a country so that it is not perceived solely as a tourist destination, but also as a credible location for inward investment”. Along with this, SCSNC launched its website www.etalents.pro, as a platform that combines the best shooting destinations, service companies, filmmakers, and talents, not only from Kazakhstan, but all over Central Asia. The website offers annual membership for £40 for castings in Kazakhstan and all over the world. By the end of 2020, 3,805 actors, 257 filmmakers and 37 companies had joined the platform (Kazakh Cinema, 2020a). It signals that the expansion of collaboration with neighbouring countries has already begun. As such, the involvement of more locations and local filmmakers in foreign films may increase the impact on the economic element of nation building.

⁶² The AFCl is a worldwide network to combine over 360 professional film commissions from 6 continents (40 countries). Its headquarters is in Los Angeles.

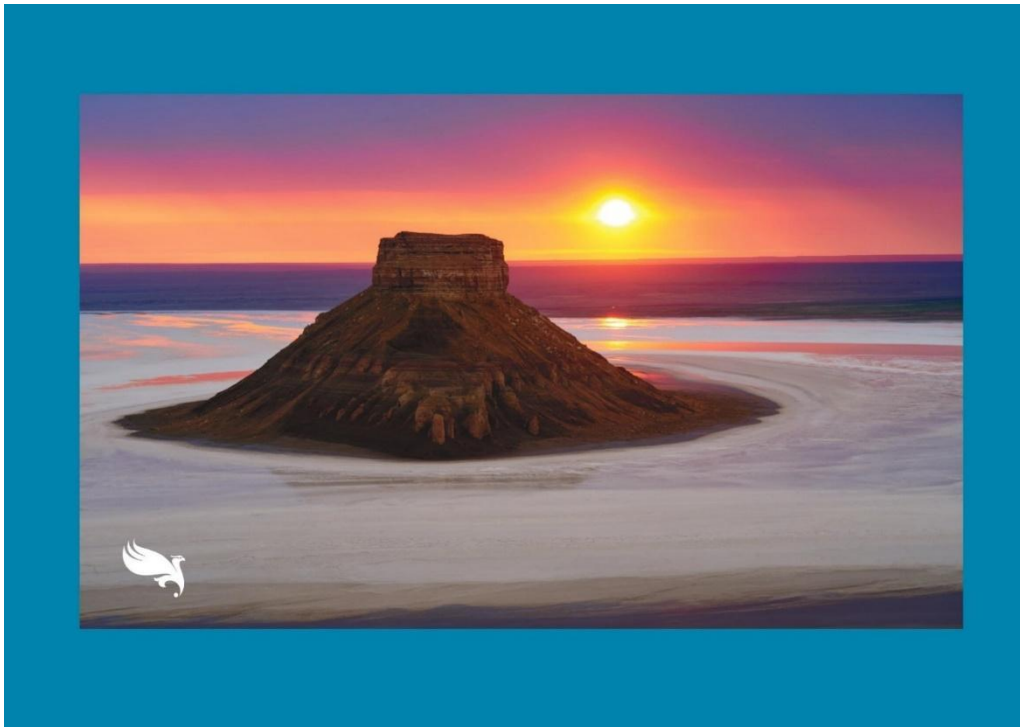


Figure 36 One of the potential film locations in the Mangystau region, Kazakhstan. Extract from the booklet at the Berlinale 2020. www.kazakhcinema.kz.

Yet the question of who gets the benefit of this tax relief is still on the agenda. On the one hand, Kazakhstan's tax relief offer of up to 30 per cent is twice that of Thailand's 15 per cent, when there are at least \$872,000 (£648,833) local filming costs in Thailand (Ravid, 2018) compared to Kazakhstani \$901,450 (£670,746). This, in turn, makes the country more attractive for global filmmakers. On the other hand, the Central Asian leader, Kazakhstan, may lose on a bad deal. If the average budget of Hollywood films, according to Alexander Shapiro, is from \$4-80 million (£2,976,300 - £59,526,000) (Alexander Shapiro, CEO of the QED International Covert Media, press conference interview, 2019), redeeming tax relief of 30 per cent for each costly Hollywood project may exceed the benefits for Kazakhstan. That is the reason for ongoing political debates in the USA (Castendyk, 2018) over co-production films versus non-beneficial agreements to the local economy. Therefore, it shows that Kazakhstan cannot be sure that the hoped-for outcomes will occur, although this is a step in the direction of both nation building and nation-branding strategies as well as co-production.

7.3 Co-production

Since the 1990s, co-production has become a norm in the auteur-led cinema field in the world (de Valck, 2014). From the film industry's angle, cinema is an international business rather than a national notion. It is argued that co-production has benefits both national and international, ensuring not only the economic growth of national cinema but also the promotion of the country's image and culture globally (Cucco, 2018). Therefore, it may be argued that co-production is potentially beneficial for nation building as well as for branding, depending on the deal and whether the extent to which each partner can pursue specific goals is clear.

Co-production is a way to achieve wider circulation of film products. For instance, over the last decade, European countries cooperated with 150 countries, 40 per cent of which were outside the EU. Belgium and Luxembourg created the majority of their films through co-production rather than as national producers, with 56 and 53 per cent, respectively (Talavera, 2018). This way of collaborating generates a larger number of admissions than national films (Ibid; Drake, 2018). Since the 1990s, festivals have taken on the additional role of promoters, and, increasingly, of co-producers for international films, from Sundance to Rotterdam (Wong, 2011). Furthermore, many of the selected films for the Cannes and Berlin festivals would not have been produced if it were not for transnational films with regional film funding (Appelgren, 2018). Discussions on how Kazakhstan can attract foreign investment have been ongoing at the Eurasia festival since 2000. Producers noted that poor infrastructure could be a stumbling block in the development of bilateral relations. At that time, co-production initiatives seemed the most likely solution to this (Bell, 2006).

Notwithstanding previous statements, according to the Central Asian film critic Gulnara Abikeyeva, producers from Russia, France, the Netherlands, and Japan have all taken an interest in Kazakhstani cinema (Abikeyeva, 2001). The most prominent co-production projects of the late 1990s and early 2000s have been: the action drama *Mongol* (2007) by Kazakhstan, Germany and Russia, with a budget of €10 million (£9,049,500 or \$12,157,100); and *Tulpan* (2008) a co-production by Kazakhstan, Germany, Russia, and Switzerland, which won Grand Prix at Zurich, Reykjavik, Tokyo, London, Montreal, Karlovy Vary, and Cannes in

different competitions in 2008. One of the key Kazakh directors in initiating co-production at the end of the 1990s has been Darezhan Omirbayev. He filmed *Killer* (1998), which won the Un Certain Regard Grand Prix at Cannes Festival, with France and *The Road* (2001) with France and Japan.

Some think it would be better to start co-production with closer, neighbouring countries, in what the film scholar Mette Hjort calls in her influential typology (2010, pp.49-50) 'affinitive transnationalism', or cooperating with 'people like us':

We are in a sufficiently strong position compared to other Central Asian countries, more or less, financially. That is, we could very easily do co-productions with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. With Uzbekistan, we would gain a market of 20 million people. There are still local options; we could go for Tatarstan, Yakutia [republics of the Russian Federation], and so on. Then there is Turkey, of course, that is close to us. (Gulnara Abikeyeva, president of the Association of Film Critics of Kazakhstan, interview, 2019)

This implies that Kazakhstan might feel more comfortable producing films with countries that are historically and culturally closer and whose location would reduce logistics costs. Yet Kazakhstan has not filmed any pictures with Central Asian states. As for Turkey, the Kazakhfilm studio has announced the casting of actors in 2019 for a large-scale historical series, which will be commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Sport. A multi-episode project will describe the life of one of the most famous Kazakh rulers - Kassym Khan, the fourth Khan of the Kazakh Khanate from about 1511 to 1521 (Kazakhfilm, 2019b). Again, however, we see Kazakhstan paying more attention to historical films, which are costly for the local budget.

There is some support for restrictive opinions. Consider this view:

Kazakh cinema cannot conquer the international market. There is absolutely no hope for that, and only a fool can have faith in that. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's markets are enough for us. (Bekbolat Tileukhan, Parliament deputy, interview, 2019)

Tileukhan's opinion was shared by another interviewee:

I don't think that Kazakh commercial films would succeed abroad, because Hollywood, Bollywood and other film industries have already

conquered the market. If Kazakh films are successful within the domestic market, that is a big achievement. (Baubek Nogerbek, associate professor, doctor in film history and theory of the National Academy of Art, interview, 2019)

If a Parliament deputy, who is also a member of the Board of Directors of the SCSNC, does not express hope in expanding the market, this shows little respect for all the achievements of Kazakh cinema since independence. This idea supports Raudino's (2015, p.119) view that the aim should be for Kazakhstan to position itself within both regional and transnational cinema. Moreover, neighbouring Kyrgyzstan's film production is less developed than Kazakhstan's film market. Its population is currently just over 6.5 million people (www.stat.kg). As such, co-production with this country will not have much impact on Kazakhstan.

The argument by Nogerbek points out that Kazakhstan first of all needs internal nation building through cinema to build internal identity. On the other hand, others emphasise that this is not enough: "for cinema to be nationally popular, it must also be international in scope" (Higson, 1989, pp.40-41). Moreover, as put by Elsaesser (2005, p.38), when Hollywood dominates the world film market, "each national cinema is both national and international". Here, one can see the undeniable and strong bond of the national with international, internal branding with the external one. If films are recognised as part of the country's cultural products abroad, then it also reflects national recognition (Sălcudean, 2017, p.212). That is why branding a country through cinema requires conquering new film markets.

Kazakhstan started to make co-production attempts in the 1990s. By 2000, the country had the highest rates of international collaboration in films in the Central Asian region. Kazakh cinema was invested in by the Netherlands, Japan, Russia, and France (Abikeyeva, 2001). However, those collaboration attempts were made by private studios and independent Kazakh producers rather than by Kazakhfilm (Abikeyeva, 2006). According to Hammett-Jamart (2018), there are two categories of co-production: the official one that appears under intergovernmental treaties; and the non-official co-production that occurs outside this policy. Kazakhstan's attempts in the 1990s belong to the latter,

without strong co-production agreements between particular states, which represent what Hjort (2010) would call ‘cosmopolitan transnationalism’.

To facilitate more adequate co-production projects that meet this combined national and international need, it is necessary to expand the audience:

Given we are historically and geographically connected, we really need to focus on co-production with Russia. It is easier for us to shoot films for this audience. We know their mentality. We know the language. Even before the Soviet Union, we had a rich shared history. You can find interesting common topics. Another potential market for us is China. A large number of the Kazakh diaspora lives in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. They are close to us both historically and with respect to language. There is Inner Mongolia as well. So, these are all big audiences. (Rashid Nugmanov, director, interview, 2019)

This needs detailed analysis. There was one example of attempted co-production with China. The Kazakhfilm Studio and the Chinese companies, Shineworks Pictures and China Film Coproduction Corporation, worked on the creation of the picture *The Composer* (2019) (see Figure 37). The film tells the story of the life and work of the Chinese composer Xian Xinghai in Almaty, as well as about his friendship with the Kazakh composer Bakytzhan Baikadamov. Film rental was only available in Kazakhstan after distribution in China. Again, no data on box-office figures in the two countries is available. Sabit Kurmanbekov, the co-director with the Chinese director Sherzod Yakub, mentioned that *The Composer* was shown in 3,000 Chinese cinema theatres, but based on the contract between the two countries, Kazakhstan only received only a small percentage of the box office revenues:

Making a co-production with China is very profitable for us because each Chinese province itself is equivalent to the whole of Russia with regard to population. However, we were unable to exhibit the film properly in Kazakhstan. We only had seven days. It was shown in one movie theatre in Almaty, one in Astana, and one in Aktobe - and that is all! That's the worst thing. Everyone knows it. But nobody wants to change the situation. (Sabit Kurmanbekov, director, interview, 2019)

This quote implies the local distribution issue. The same happened with Kurmanbekov's *The Returnee* (2017) (see section 4.2.2). Others have more to say on this: “The problem is that you need to invest money in your project before you can know whether they [potential buyers] will buy it from you or not. It is a

precarious business, this is why it needs to be done via co-production” (Alexander Shapiro, CEO of QED International Covert Media, press-conference interview, 2019). However, this does not work well in Kazakhstan due to unresolved issues with distribution and theatrical exhibition issues. Co-production will not work efficiently unless Kazakhstan solves it within the country. Otherwise, it will not be worth bothering with it. On the other hand, filming unsuccessful projects with Kazakhstan may just be considered to be a Chinese soft-power tool; that is, as a means of exerting general influence, given the film was initiated by China, even though cooperation with the emerging film industry of Kazakhstan is not particularly advantageous to them from a financial point of view. Moreover, Xie Fei, a Chinese film critic and member of the NETPAC jury at the EurIFF 15, stated that the film was not successful in China (press conference interview, 2019). The film turned out to be more Chinese than Kazakh, and only the appearance of several Kazakh actors demonstrated some aspect of Kazakhstan (Baitukenov, 2019). The movie tries to generate the idea that the two countries are ‘brothers’.



Figure 37 The poster of the biopic *The Composer* (2019) by Kazakhstan and China. www.kazakhfilmstudios.kz.

Currently, over half a million ethnic Kazakhs, not to mention Uighurs, are being killed in Chinese re-education camps, where they are tortured, raped, deprived of sleep, and forced to take suspicious and harmful medicine (Javaid, 2019; Maas, 2019). According to other sources, up to 1.5 million ethnic Muslims, which is equivalent to one in six adults, have been sent to brainwashing camps (Zenz, 2019; Raza, 2019). China takes children away from their parents in order to destroy their religious faith and culture in orphanages (Hiatt, 2019). This has been ongoing since 2017. It can be considered, as Maas (2009, p.18) calls it, “cultural genocide”, if not a political one. However, China denies it. The Chinese Embassy in the UK told the BBC that the allegations of torture were “sheer rumour” (BBC, 2020). Kazakhstani officials believe only Chinese official statements. In his interview to Deutsche Welle Russian, the president of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, said that “In general, these materials are

not true. Perhaps, there are some isolated cases of people of Kazakh nationality entering these schools for re-education” (Deutsche Welle, 2019, n.p.). Moreover, Kazakhstan would not provide asylum for Kazakhs who crossed the border illegally to flee China’s repressive policy. Instead, they imprisoned them along with those who protested to support them. If China is actively trying to eradicate Kazakh/Muslim identity, how can Kazakhstan trade culturally with China when the culture itself is being repressed? One may argue that co-production with China is immoral.

Secondly, China is a highly regulated market. Only one American company, Union Pictures, had a 7.5 per cent of market share in 2016, whereas the market is filled by six other Chinese companies (Statista.com, 2016). In 2018 the number of major cinema screens in China reached over 60 (Kwok, 2019) and continues to grow. In this regard, it is challenging and almost impossible for Kazakhstan to release its films in the Chinese market in such a competitive environment. This is a brief explanation why the above-mentioned *The Composer* was not successful in the “Celestial Empire”.

Although European producers tend to think that the advantages of co-production outweigh its disadvantages, since this region has become a world centre for international collaboration in the film industry (Hammett-Jamart, Mitric & Redvall, 2018), for Kazakhstan cooperation with Russia, mentioned as a good film-production option by Rashid Nugmanov, would favour the Russian language and weaken the role of the already marginalised Kazakh language. As such, it would expand the hegemony of the Russian language, whereas Kazakh film production is already suffering at the moment from the problem of mixed-language productions. Moreover, the challenges of “linguistic diversity, different national film cultures” exist in the European distribution market as well (Drake, 2018, p.86; Appelgren, 2018). This downside has been emphasised by Cucco (2018) who states that bilateral work risks becoming a hybrid product without developing roots within the indigenous culture. Also, one country may benefit at the expense of the other in co-production (Elsaesser, 2005, p.37). It is also notable that in countries of the European Union, ‘indigenous’ production is a policy priority, if the film is produced within the orbit of the European Union’s single market (Magor and Schlesinger, 2009, p.301). Kazakhstan’s film

production is not similarly protected, and this model of production may further weaken the country's identity.

Also, analysing an example from French cinema, Hayward (2005, p.50) argues:

It is in this murky area of co-productions, especially when they are the predominant production practice, that the identity of a national cinema becomes confused - as was the case in the 1920s and in the 1960s. [...] It is not just the loss of the specificity of a national identity that such practices can entail [...] the pursuance of these practices also caused a loss of small-to-medium-budget films.

This echoes Eleftheriotis' (2001, p.33) argument stating that "the lack of 'purity' in the co-production is not only the source of classificatory confusion but also a serious threat to a national mode of production". Hence, co-production films become transnational rather than national (Eleftheriotis, 2001, p.48), and the films do not need to symbolically wave the national flag of the filmmaker (Palis, 2015). As such, Kazakh-Russian films are not likely to evoke Kazakh culture.

However, some examples of collaboration with East Asia have increased turnover. Kazakhfilm finished a project with Japan about Japanese captives in the KARLAG camp in Kazakhstan (see section 2.2.1) *Akhiko from Aktas. The Horse Thieves* is a second project between Kazakhfilm and Tokyo New Cinema. Directed by Yerlan Nurmukhambetov and Lisa Takeba, it opened at the Busan International Film Festival in 2019. According to the plot, based on a true story, a gang of horse thieves trick a man, brutally kill him, and steal a herd of horses. At the same time, his son is suffering a loss and is trying to cope with a tragedy. At the moment of despair and defencelessness, a mysterious stranger named Kairat begins to help the family (Brod.kz, 2018). *Variety* marks the film as "a learning and co-operative experience between filmmakers from different cultures" (Frater, 2019, n.p.), and the *Hollywood Reporter* called it "an exemplar of ... vivid geographical, cultural and perspective alternatives" (Kerr, 2019, n.p.). Therefore, as Eleftheriotis (2001, p.49) notes: "films can cross-cultural and national borders and can 'travel'". These examples show that some cases of co-production can be successful in the international market despite the different cultures of the filmmakers.



Figure 38 From left to right: signing the memorandum of cooperation by the SCSNC with GFM Production Studio (Georgia), "Uzbekfilm" (Uzbekistan), Kyrgyzfilm National Film Studio (Kyrgyzstan), and Tatarkino (Tatarstan, Russian Federation). www.eiff.kz.

The SCSNC, aiming to collaborate with the post-Soviet republics, during the EurIFF 15 signed a memorandum of cooperation with Tatarkino, Belorusfilm, Uzbekfilm, Sakhafilm, Kyrgyzfilm, and Georgian film studios (see Figure 38). Commenting on the signing of the agreements on collaboration, the chairman of the board, Andrey Khazbulatov, noted that this event would be an essential step in strengthening friendship and developing the cinema of the countries of Eurasia. “The festival is an association of like-minded people who support cinema”, said the chairman. This quote reveals that the body sees the above-mentioned international film studios as a means of developing national cinema, leading to further expansion of the distribution market. In this respect, the EurIFF was used as a platform to expand cooperation between the Kazakhstan and CIS film studios. Six signed memorandums may expand the geographical coverage of Kazakh film. This was the case with Switzerland, which uses co-

production deals to expand its market and to screen films at major film festivals (Cucco, 2018). Also, currently the UK, which is one of the leading countries in filming high-quality movies, has bilateral co-production agreements with 12 countries (Newsinger and Presence, 2018, p.452). However, signed memorandums in Kazakhstan do not guarantee instant and high-quality film growth, as is clearly evident with US films.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the two linked research questions about the degree to which, firstly the EurIFF contributes to nation building, and, secondly, on what is the role of Kazakh cinema in nation building.

This chapter has argued that Kazakh cinema is on the threshold of gradual industrial development. I traced the influence of EurIFF as an industry supporting Kazakhstan's nation building. The study tried to evaluate the impact of co-production and tax incentives on the growth of the Kazakhstani film business.

Previously, the Eurasia Film Market and Eurasia Spotlight pitching sessions were different organisations, suffered from instability, lack of funding, and the constantly changing leadership of the EurIFF. Statistical data to measure the previous market's success was not available. Thus, the EurIFF from a film industry point of view was less successful due to the same reasons I described in Chapters 5 and 6.

The pitching of international projects highlighted several issues. Firstly, in terms of holding genuine pitching sessions with funding support for winners, it is clear that the EurIFF cannot compete with the newly-established Almaty Film Festival, which is more market-oriented than the unstable Nur-Sultan-centric festival. Secondly, the EurIFF's pitching sessions, even if held only to attract potential partners for those films, failed to capitalise on international funding and to build on the opportunities gained from a previously negotiated deal with Netflix.

The language issue in the country limits the nation building of Kazakhstan both internally and externally. Kazakh filmmakers prefer to shoot in Russian in order to reach the general population and Western distributors circulate foreign films dubbed into Russian in all CIS countries. It makes the distribution of film as a cultural form uncertain. In order to expand its borders and conquer new markets, film production needs to go beyond Kazakhstan so that it can achieve international recognition. Cooperation with neighbouring Russia weakens the role of the already 'secondary' Kazakh language in the country. As a result, the scope of the influence of cinema on nation building is restricted.

The findings confirmed that the festival had been attempting to form new partnerships between Hollywood studios and the SCSNC. Signing bilateral agreements with international producers and studios (LIONSGATE, NBS Universal, Warner Horizon, Discovery, Global Film Solutions) may be treated as the first steps in collaboration that may bring benefits in future. The EurIFF has shown itself to be a platform to tie these networks with the outside world. By keeping these factors in mind, it can be argued that the EurIFF has served to bridge gaps between the demands of both the Kazakh film industry and those relatively few professionals from the West who are eager to collaborate with Central Asia.

Another finding is that Kazakhstan, as a vast country with a small population, is not interesting to international filmmakers apart from opportunities it provides for tax breaks. From an economic perspective, as was evident from the fieldwork, industry-based initiatives under the Cinema Law (2019), such as tax rebates, are there to assist Kazakh films in entering the transnational market. I argue that although tax incentives are intended to attract investments to the local film industry and to develop film-induced tourism, they can also act as a loophole that may be manipulated by the global film studios. Refunding up to 30 per cent of film costs for expensive Hollywood movies can be harmful to the local profits. Clearly, there are conflicting interests between film policy and the benefits for Kazakhstan.

Although co-production can boost the film industry in Kazakhstan, Kazakh films cannot survive in the competitive Chinese market, where even American distribution studios are content with a small share. Co-production may also be a

threat to Kazakh indigenous production, with the potential loss of a national identity that is essential to nation building.

The findings showed that the EurIFF as a platform of filmic experience has incipient film market and business components. So, its contribution as an industry to nation building is limited. Tax rebates and co-production, with a possible increase in the scope and geographical coverage of the Kazakh cinema, might contribute to Kazakhstan's image in future, when the country's film policy has matured. However, currently, this contribution limits the economic benefits for Kazakhstan as well as the development of its national identity.

8 Conclusions

Kazakhstan as a post-colonial nation finds itself situated at the crossroads of complex political and economic issues affecting cultural policy. This thesis has explored how the Kazakh nation reconstructs and defines itself through films by taking an ethno-symbolism approach inspired by Anthony Smith's work. Kazakh cinema content - exemplified by two case studies of film production and the Eurasia International Film Festival - was investigated by employing both semi-structured interviews and observational work alongside desk research.

The study advanced three research questions: Who takes the decisions in the Kazakh cinema market and who controls it? To what extent does EurIFF contribute to nation building and the projection of a national identity? What is the role of the Kazakh cinema in nation building? Considering the transition period in film policy, first of all, the thesis studied how the new Cinema Law is reshaping Kazakh film production. Secondly, it examined the case of the EurIFF in terms of its organisation and challenges that created serious obstacles for the festival's development. Thirdly, the research critiqued how programming and curation, and Kazakh cinema's connection with audiences (both local and international) impacted on recognition of the festival and the country. Finally, this study has explored the commercial element of Kazakh cinema and the EurIFF and their relationship with the global film industry as a means of measuring their impact on the country's image.

As outlined in the introductory chapter, several studies investigated Kazakh cinema in general and, more specifically, from a nation-building perspective. It is worth noting that, to date, there are no academic works on the EurIFF and its difference from counterparts in Europe and Asia. This thesis has aimed to fill this existing gap in Kazakh film studies.

This chapter will draw out some conclusions on the findings in relation to the three research questions in turn. From there, it will move on to discuss the implications of these results for film policy in Kazakhstan. The last section will both highlight the limitations of the study and suggest possible further areas for research, before making its concluding remarks.

8.1 Findings

Who takes the decisions in the Kazakh cinema market and who controls it?

Chapter 4 considered the production of cinema from both historical and contemporary points of view. The evidence indicated that, before 2019, Kazakh cinema was in a deplorable state. The new Cinema Law has divided the history of Kazakh film policy into two systems: before and after/old and new. The debate around the Law, which is maybe too general in some respects, was shaped by economic and political factors.

In Kazakhstan today, support for national cinema is represented by two main organisations: the SCSNC as the main financial operator in terms of financing film projects, and the old operator, the Kazakhfilm Studio, acting as the main base for film production of both national and international film projects.

My main argument is that given the authoritarian nature of the clan regime in Kazakhstan, political and cultural nation building (including cinematic nation building) has a top-down approach and operates between the *Papa* of the nation, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and his administration. What is more, the incoherence of the new system and tensions between the old and new systems hinder Kazakhstan's nation-building aspirations. Both the SCSNC and JSC Kazakhfilm have national status. Both are controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Sport. Since the SCSNC is an innovation of the film policy of Kazakhstan and offers a new policy model, there are inevitable pressure between the two systems. This creates internal conflicts that impede new developments. Those running the old system do not want to lose power or change from the old Soviet-style system. The findings reinforce what Abikeyeva (2006, p.290) concluded 15 years ago; namely, that the "one studio-one producer" system does not fit the new realities of Kazakhstan.

This study showed that these two systems reflect differing interests of a range of people all competing for resources. With respect to these competing tensions between both systems, the Ministry of Culture and Sport (sometimes dictated by the upper echelons), represented by the Interdepartmental Commission at the

SCSNC, has the final say in making decisions related to film funding. This now puts JSC Kazakhfilm - previously responsible for funding - at a disadvantage. The chapter also found that the combined system that is now just beginning to move forward has many problems in finance, due partly to bureaucracy, fraud, and uncertainty.

The findings suggest that despite the twice-reformed Expert Council, its decisions do little more than act as a sieve to separate out promising film projects. The interviewees noted that the new system that has been created for authorising funding is very complicated, and that it is a mixture of professional criteria provided by experts and political criteria provided by people in the political system. There is a well-founded perception that decisions about film funding are often a *fait accompli*, and that these pre-decided choices are often politically driven.

It was the rationale of this study to see to what extent the restructuring of the cinema system changed the relationship between the market and the state. Kazakhstan had set an objective of trying to project Kazakhstan to the world. However, it would seem fair to conclude that the reforms in cinema production are sometimes contradictory. All interviewees pointed to distribution and the fact that Kazakh films do not reach the audience as Kazakh cinema's main problem, which clearly defeats the main reason for making them in the first place and certainly doesn't contribute to the country's original aim of promoting the country in the wider world.

With regard to the support of national films in the domestic market, some interviewees felt that Kazakhstan needs to stop promoting foreign films, especially Russian ones, as they dominate the market and, for this reason, often blur the domestic content. This study showed that Kazakh comedies are the most dominant genre and the only type of film that grosses high rates at the box office. Needless to say, one of the major problems in Kazakhstan is that with cinema theatres 100 per cent privately owned, the government cannot force them to screen local films, and cinema theatres have to prioritise Western films at the expense of local ones for ticket proceeds.

The film industry is globalised, and Kazakhstan - with such a small population - cannot avoid the rules set by the global film economy. The inconclusive reform process in the country does not, and cannot, revive the wide circulation of Kazakh cinema that prevailed in Soviet times. However, films about the political leader never face obstacles in terms of circulation and promotion. An imbalance in the intentions of the government in regard to solving the issue of distribution is evident. Furthermore, a lack of statistical data has increasingly worsened the situation with regard to market control and sales forecasting. Kazakhstan's film policy, controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Sport, is dependent on the biggest world film-market players: Western film interests and Russia.

Uncertainty about the distribution process, which is still ongoing, obstructs both the domestic and international progress of Kazakh cinema, impacting on its profile. These are the issues that the Cinema Law with its sub-legal documents are expected to address in the near future.

To what extent does the EurIFF contribute to nation building and projection of a national identity?

The micro case of this case study, the annual Eurasian International Film Festival, has been found to have several important differences from traditional European models.

This study confirmed that the contribution of the EurIFF on the nation building of Kazakhstan was limited. The thesis findings suggest that the EurIFF thus far has only had a minor branding effect on the country's image.

The EurIFF, as the main film event and state-sanctioned forum in Kazakhstan accredited by FIAPF, suffered from a misunderstanding of the government's input with respect to decision making on the part of the government itself. The constantly changing leadership of the event resulting from the tender system does not allow the EurIFF to gain experience and to grow. Late funding decisions, as well as the late announcement of the festival dates, significantly affected the EurIFF's image, which, in turn, influences the city's and country's identity as well.

When it comes to the festival's venue, the EurIFF did not have a permanent office in either Almaty or Nur-Sultan. The relocation of the EurIFF from Almaty to Astana in 2017 continues to send mixed messages to those who have already got used to Eurasia as a young festival. Moreover, renaming the capital city as Nur-Sultan in 2019 hit the festival's image. Many interviewees noted that, given the fact that, most of the filmmakers and film professionals are in Almaty, the Nur-Sultan oriented festival inevitably demands additional costs. These findings raise questions about whether the festival justifies its expenses. Moreover, since the EurIFF does not have commercial interests and does not aim to earn profits like A-list festivals such as Cannes, Venice, Berlinale, and Locarno, these findings suggest that the EurIFF is just an image-making event and is not expected to earn money.

The influence of programming and curation on the flow of the festival is enormous and cannot be underestimated. In contrast to the limitations of distribution, the EurIFF has more cultural empowerment. As is evident in Chapter 6, EurIFF 15 was dominated by the influence of a foreign curator, who brought international taste to EurIFF. The festival was not limited by censorship and offered complete freedom to curators and selectors to choose the best films for Eurasia. This was seen as an advantage.

In Chapter 6 it was shown that occasionally the approach of the International Juries in the past was unfair and lacked probity, particularly with respect to them distributing the awards either to themselves or foreign guests - going from one extreme to another. According to my findings, jurors of the EurIFF 15 tried to get to grips with more sophisticated ideas when considering pitches, evaluating concepts such as integrity, longevity, and high-level thinking, and asking the question 'What makes the film relevant to new generations?'. One influential informant also expressed the view that any decision could be subjective or emotional, and that it cannot be a totally objective decision when it comes to cinema. An example of a subjective decision is the awarding of the Grand Prix to the Kazakh film *The Secret of a Leader* by Farkhat Sharipov rather than the four-time Oscar winner *Parasite*. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that the EurIFF tends to provide fair solutions without interfering in the decision-making process.

As my findings have shown, the EurlIFF could not fully connect with its audience. The analysis of the festival's operations suggests that it could be the best way for people to know more about Kazakhstan, but arguably more successfully if it had more - especially international - visitors rather than just the 12,000 locals who attended. The analysis showed that the audience engagement in theatrically screened films was adequate despite the low capacity of 140 to 160 seats in the two halls. However, viewing in previous years was not sufficient, although there were more than enough cinema theatres. Interviewees argued that this was because of the audience's inadequate knowledge of cinema culture.

The neglect in recording data on visitor numbers suggests that the festival does not have a marketing approach. Added to this, any statistical data that does exist is not made readily available. Again, these findings show that the festival limits its potential by mainly catering for the needs of the local audience, rather than drawing on earlier data and experience to impact on future decisions.

The industrial potential of the EurlIFF is revealed in the analysis of Chapter 7. The EurlIFF had a business element seen its pitching of international projects. Findings revealed that although the jurors valued the professional approach of the participants, and emphasised that the pitching was held openly, their decisions were just nominal ones and did not carry any real weight. For instance, it was clear from the research that the aim was just to present the projects to the heads of international studios in case there was the opportunity for cooperation in the future.

What is the role of Kazakh cinema in nation building?

The study offered insights into the preconditions for film policy intervention. In general, this research does not paint a very optimistic picture of positive nation-building outcomes for Kazakhstan. The findings align with Smith's (1998) concept of ethno-symbolism, suggesting that Kazakhstan is still in the process of reconstructing itself through films. Symbolism is circulated through films (mainly historical), and in this way, the movies bring both the Sovietised and the post-

Soviet Kazakh nation together as a community. This statement underpins the argument of Isaacs and Polese (2016, p.251) that nation building as a process “has no formal end and is based on over changing markers, perceptions and measures that are put forward by a potentially unlimited number of actors”. This ongoing process keeps happening in Kazakhstan. The growing professionalisation of the industry is hampered by old-fashioned structures, people, and ideologies which act as obstacles to change. Consequently, Kazakhstan is working at two different rates of development - the old and new systems - in the industry, with different interests at work. All of these obstacles limit the nation-building principles of Kazakh cinema.

As part of the construction of the nation, a separate related issue here is how can Kazakhstan be marketed. As the results show, the lines between the state and the film industry in Kazakhstan are quite clearly drawn: the government is concerned with addressing its internal needs to construct a national public, while the industry is seeking an international market for its films. As is evident in Chapter 7, it is only possible to market the nation through cinema when the Law is working well with clear strategies; transparent and fair film funding, and internal marketing aimed at creating an identity for the Kazakh nation. Yet it is also clear that this is rarely adequately achieved.

However, this thesis has recognised some positives with respect to recent developments in Kazakhstan. The country is becoming highly appealing to international producers due to its newly-introduced tax breaks, so tying the knot with co-productions would certainly be one of the options for expanding the audience, but this would occur without being able to establish a strong cultural and national identity. According to the analysis, given that Kazakhstan launched this initiative ahead of Russia and the rest of the Central Asian region, by allowing the filming of small- and large-scale productions in its territory, Kazakhstan can reach its potential recognition. But it was not clear how Kazakhstani ideas can get translated into specific, concrete proposals when the country has infrastructural challenges. It is fair to say that the location function of Kazakhstan cannot be capitalised upon within the overall development of the film policy, which is still not very consistent. In addition, it does appear that this

scheme may put Kazakhstan in an unfavourable position by allowing its tax preferences and benefits to be manipulated by countries abroad.

It is much harder to speculate about the necessity of co-production for Kazakhstan. Findings showed that the local filmmakers fully support this option. Some interviewees suggested that the country should collaborate with neighbouring countries. One camp supported cooperation with culturally close countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey) and 'stateless' nations (Tatarstan, Yakutia), whereas the other camp believed that cooperation with geographically close Russia and China would be more beneficial. However, the analysis showed that working with Russia would, in all likelihood, disadvantage or even destroy the Kazakh language and identity, given the continuing weight of Russian culture and language in the marketplace. Also, co-production with China is problematic due to the repressive Chinese policy on Kazakhs and Uighurs, aimed at destroying Muslim communities. , Kazakh films may not be successful in the highly regulated and competitive Chinese Market. This raises questions about how Kazakhstan is going to consolidate its relationship within cinema when cultural diversity and culture itself are being suppressed. As findings show, in both cases, Kazakh identity would be eroded, and one particular cultural feature of the nation would not be highlighted.

On the whole, although this analysis did find a slight positive tendency between views on co-production perspectives and tax rebates, Kazakh cinema is facing the new challenge of responding to Hollywood by cooperating with it.

8.2 Implications for film policy

2019 clearly shows Kazakhstani cinema at a new phase in its development. The reform process is still underway. This is painful for the older category of filmmakers, who are used to an outdated development model. Despite the reforms, there are major obstacles rooted in Kazakh society and the functioning of cultural power. Challenges such as bureaucracy, corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and nepotism in narrow circles of Kazakhstani cinematography are serious obstacles to change and development.

As this thesis shows, when we look at the whole picture of Kazakh cinema and nation building, it is clear that there could be both predictable and surprising outcomes for filmmakers and film policy. The enactment of the Cinema Law has revealed the gap between the articles of the Law and the government's activity on the ground, particularly if we look at the Ministry of Culture and Sport. The long-awaited creation of the SCSNS has brought various advantages such as making selections for funding open to the public, centralising film policy as an institute, and attempting to promote the Kazakh cinema locally and internationally. However, it becomes clear that Kazakhstan has the potential to build a strong national identity if it solves its internal distribution of films in the first instance.

Although Kazakhstan does not lead the world on cinema production as India does with its Bollywood, increased distribution of Kazakh cinema has the potential to reconstruct the nation through films. In this regard, the EurlIFF can play a vital role in diversifying the Kazakh film landscape. If it gains stability both financially and politically, the EurlIFF might be expected to find more extensive expansion and broader international connections. The gradual growth of the popularity of the festival gives hope that Kazakh cinema will experience increased success in the forthcoming decades.

An interesting subject throughout in this respect has been the question of enticing foreign investment into Kazakhstan with tax incentives. The discussions surrounding the tax rebate scheme demonstrate how Kazakhstan may remain in a vulnerable position if it allows international producers to manipulate these financial incentives. However, on the other hand, it may also be an excellent means of putting Kazakh cinema on the map. Kazakhstan's policy is now working to attract international producers to shoot in the country's spectacular locations. Here, one can see the nation-branding efforts of the country as argued by Volcic and Andrejevic (2011, p.599): the "creation of a national brand image goes hand-in-hand with the development of catchy slogans to portray countries from Kosovo to Uganda as desirable tourist destinations". Following the other slogan-making countries such as "Kosovo: The Youngest Europeans", "Incredible India", and "Malaysia, Truly Yours!", Kazakhstan has advertised itself in film policy as well. In this regard, a catchy slogan from *Borat* 'Very nice!' could

become a slogan for all film shooting locations and thus promote film-induced tourism in particular.

8.3 Limitations and further research

The main limitations of this thesis are related to the sample of interviews and their representativeness. More than half of the interviewees were indigenous Kazakhstani citizens expressing their points of view from their roles in the internal situation. These conversations represent the view within Kazakhstan and do not reflect on how the policy portrays the country abroad. This leads to some bias. However, to combat this bias, interviews with foreign participants at the EurIFF were also undertaken.

A second limitation is related to the extent to which the interviewees were honest and sincere with the researcher. Some of them revealed valuable information that has never been published anywhere before, whereas several informants were afraid of losing their jobs and did not disclose full data.

The interviews themselves are embodied in the four empirical chapters of this study. Using mainly face-to-face meetings had a significant advantage over online interviewing. However, using surveys or focus groups, involving international students around Scotland, and a mixed-method approach would have expanded the results and findings of the thesis.

The last limitation referred to is the translation process. As the lion's share of the interviews was conducted in Kazakh or Russian and both were transcribed into English, there may be some bias in the way I have translated certain words into English from the two languages. Finally, the subjective experience of the researcher in picking up a specific quotation could affect the research process, as my personal opinions and experience might have steered the approach of this thesis. However, remaining critically aware of these limitations throughout the process has hopefully helped keep this bias to a minimum.

Although the scope of this thesis has covered the most critical aspects of Kazakh cinema concerning nation building, there are still themes that need to be researched in future. With regard to the industry side to the research, there needs to be future research into the online digital streaming platforms of film distribution, given the growing area that this is (now much increased during the current COVID-19 quarantine and self-isolation period of 2020/21).

Also, the SCSNC provides ample scope for institutional analysis as a specific entity. It would be beneficial to explore it separately as a single operator of film policy in Kazakhstan and how it impacts on industry and audience as well as nation-building aspirations.

8.4 Concluding remarks

This thesis shed light on and made a contribution to knowledge of Kazakh cinema as an independent study unit by providing 30 participant informants' direct experience of the industry from the 'inside', contextualised by extensive additional data-gathering and relevant theoretical reflection. The study, as original research, revealed the unusual picture of the Kazakh style of dealing with film policy (production and festivals), and how policy is making an important step towards the development of a national film production industry.

Kazakh cinema, like the country itself, is in transition. The state is facing political transition of power, whereas Kazakh cinema and film policy is trying to move from the Soviet system to one of the modern era. Political nation building is based on the tribal clan identity and the authoritarian leader Nursultan Nazarbayev and his ruling elite. His system is trying to rewrite the history of the Kazakh nation through films as he wants it to be perceived. Also, cinematic nation building is limited by the Soviet legacy, evident in the burning issue of bilingualism, the unwillingness of the state to solve the distribution system, and the struggle for power in film policy. Kazakhstan is economically and politically tightly bound to Russia. This shapes national cinema, where distribution flow is concentrated in Russia. Therefore, cinematic nation building is closely linked to political nation building.

If the SCSNC's commitment to its work were free from corruption and intrigues, in the near future, Kazakhstan could rediscover and rebuild its true, particular national identity. An identity which could be revived through films by ensuring transparent decision-making in film funding competitions, by diversification of film genres, and, finally, by solving the domestic distribution issues of Kazakh national cinema.

Appendices

Appendix A. List of interviewees.

№	Name	Position	Date and place	Duration of the interview
1.	Adilkhan Yerzhanov	Director and screenwriter	25.02.2019, Almaty	53 minutes
2.	Alma Aidar	Doctor and senior lecturer in Film History and Theory of the National Academy of Art in Almaty	21.02.2019, Almaty	37 minutes
3.	Ainur Issayeva	Press officer of the JSC Kazakhfilm studio	27.02.2019, Almaty	51 minutes
4.	Andrey Khazbulatov	Chairman of the Board of the SCSNC	06.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	39 minutes
5.	Anna Darmodekhina	Press officer of the Meloman distribution company	27.06.2019, Almaty	1 hour and 3 minutes
6.	Anonymous respondent	-	18.02.2019 -	2 hours and 30 minutes
7.	Asanali Ashimov	Actor, director, screenwriter and Chairman of the first Expert Council of the SCSNC	03.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	32 minutes
8.	Askhat Kuchincherekov	Actor, screenwriter, director and producer	03.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	11 minutes
9.	Baubek Nogerbek	Associate Professor, Doctor in Film History and Theory of the National Academy of Art in Almaty	21.02.2019, Almaty	1 hour and 5 minutes
10.	Bauyrzhan Shukenov	Director of the Arman cinema network and a member of the Expert Council of the SCSNC	27.02.2019, Almaty	1 hour 40 minutes
11.	Bekbolat Tileukhan	Parliament deputy	06.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	17 minutes

12.	Darezhan Omirbayev	Director, screenwriter and film critic	21.02.2019, Almaty	1 hour 52 minutes
13.	Doskhan Zholzhaksynov	Actor, director and member of the First Expert Council, of the SCSNC	11.07.2019, telephone interview	1 hour 28 minutes
14.	Gulnara Abikeyeva	President of the Association of Film Critics of Kazakhstan	20.02.2019, Almaty	1 hour and 10 minutes
15.	Gulzat Shurenova-Kalishuk	Head of the Kazakhfilm studio's Rental and Marketing Department	01.03.2019, Almaty	10 minutes
16.	Han Jeong-gil	Korean director	02.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	15 minutes
17.	Ilyas Akhmet	Producer, director of Eurasia Spotlight's Business Platform at the EurIFF	05.10.2020, telephone interview	19 minutes
18.	Kanat Torebay	Producer and Executive Director of the EurIFF	03.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	48 minutes
19.	Mirabbas Khosravinezhad	Iranian director	04.06.2019, Nur-Sultan	6 minutes
20.	Nurlan Sanzhar	Actor and screenwriter of the JSC Kazakhfilm studio	04.03.2019, Almaty	53 minutes
21.	Nurzhyman Yktymbayev	Soviet and Kazakh actor.	04.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	40 minutes
22.	Olzhabai Mussabekov	Head of the JSC Kazakhfilm studio's Audiovisual Projects	04.03.2019, Almaty	1 hour and 10 minutes
23.	Rashid Nugmanov	Soviet and Kazakh director, screenwriter, producer and President of the National Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences of Kazakhstan	23.02.2019 and 02.03.2019, Almaty	45 minutes
24.	Sabit Kurmanbekov	Director, screenwriter and production designer	06.07. 2019, Nur-Sultan	1 hour and 2 minutes
25.	Satybaldy Narymbetov	Soviet and Kazakh film director, and screenwriter	04.03.2019, Almaty	1 hour and 8 minutes

26.	Serik Abishev	Film director and producer	20.02.2019, Almaty	1 hour and 5 minutes
27.	Slambek Tauekel	Soviet and Kazakh film director, screenwriter, producer and Professor of the Department of Film and TV of the Kazakh National University of Arts in Nur-Sultan	30.06.2019, Nur-Sultan	1 hour and 7 minutes
28.	Tamas Toth	Hungarian director and Chairman of the international jury of the EurIFF 15	30.06.2019, Nur-Sultan	24 minutes
29.	Vladimir Karachevskiy	Head of the Belarusfilm National Film Studio	03.07.2019, Nur-Sultan	16 minutes
30.	Zhandos Yespenbetov	Film and television director	21.02.2019, Almaty	53 minutes

Appendix B. The composition of the first EC at the SCSNC (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

1.	Adai Abeldinov	Director-Animator
2.	Asanali Ashimov	People's Artist of the Kazakh SSR and the USSR, Laureate of state awards of the Kazakh SSR and the USSR and Chairman of the EC.
3.	Vadim Golenko	General Director of the Meloman Limited Liability Partnership, and distributor
4.	Doskhan Zholzhaksynov	Actor, director, producer, screenwriter, People's Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Honoured Artist of Kyrgyzstan and Laureate of the State Prize of the Republic of Kazakhstan
5.	Serik Zhubandykov	First Vice-President of the JSC Kazakhfilm
6.	Akhat Ibrayev	Producer, film director and member of the Union of Filmmakers of Kazakhstan
7.	Aleksei Kamenskii	Director and screenwriter.
8.	Bakyt Kaiyrbekov	Honoured Worker of Kazakhstan, President of JSC Kazakhfilm, film director and screenwriter
9.	Zhannat Kuanysheva	Honoured Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Head of the JSC Kazakhfilm's Acting department
10.	Askhat Maemirov	Theatre director, Honoured Worker of Kazakhstan, Rector of the Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T. Zhurgenov, Vice-President of the Association of Theatres of Kazakhstan, and PhD holder
11.	Satybaldy Narymbetov	Film director, Honoured Worker of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Laureate of the State Prize of the Republic of Kazakhstan
12.	Meruert Otekeshova	Actress and Honoured Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan
13.	Bekbolat Shekerov	Screenwriter and art critic
14.	Bauyrzhan Shukenov	General Director of the "Arman" cinema network and distributor

Appendix C. The composition of the second EC at SCSNC (www.kazakhcinema.kz).

1.	Damir Ainikeyev	Director of “Studio CUBIC” LLP, producer and director
2.	Leila Aranysheva	Filmmaker and screenwriter
3.	Oleg Boretskiy	Film critic
4.	Saltanat Dungenbayeva	Screenwriter and animator
5.	Anar Kashaganova	Film producer
6.	Serikbol Utepbergenov	Screenwriter, film director and actor
7.	Farkhat Sharipov	Film director, producer and screenwriter
8.	Adai Abeldinov	Director-animator
9.	Vadim Golenko	General Director of the Meloman Limited Liability Partnership and distributor
10.	Bekbolat Shekerov	Screenwriter and art critic
11.	Bauyrzhan Shukenov	General Director of the “Arman” cinema network and distributor
12.	Meruert Otekesheva	Actress and Honoured Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
13.	Zhannat Kuanysheva	Actress and Honoured Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan
14.	Yermek Tursunov (left the EC)	Filmmaker, screenwriter, chairman of the Union of Filmmakers and President of the 15 EurIFF
15.	Satybaldy Narymbetov (left the EC)	Film director, Honoured Worker of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Laureate of the State Prize of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Appendix D. Questions for the interviewees.

Questions for organisers of the EurIFF:

What is the agenda of the festival? In your opinion, how does the EurIFF cope with its tasks and aims?

What is the targeted audience of the EurIFF?

Who funds the festival? How much money is allocated per year? Do you think it is enough?

Do you think the event justifies the invested money? How much profit does it make?

What is the relationship of the EurIFF to the Kazakh government? To what extent does the government have control over the agenda of EurFF?

Do you consider that Kazakh films can in some way promote Kazakhstan abroad? If so, how?

This festival seems to have been organised rather late. Why do you think that happened? Has it made it more challenging to achieve what is needed?

How has moving the venue from Almaty to Nur-Sultan changed the character of the festival?

Questions for the international jury:

What were the main criteria for selecting films? How broad a remit did you have in this respect?

What is the goal of the festival's film selection?

What are the main criteria to select the winners of the festival?

Does the EurIFF system differ from that of other festivals you attended? In which way?

Questions for participants of EurIFF:

Are you a permanent participant of this festival?

Did you know about the creation of the festival? Do you consider it as an excellent way to brand Kazakhstan internationally?

How does the EurFF differ from other Kazakhstani festivals?

Have you come to any conclusions about the EurFF? Has it provided what you want? Is there anything else you think it should do?

Questions for the Meloman distribution company representative:

Would you please tell more about the distribution policy of your company?

What aims do you pursue in working with the cinema theatres in Kazakhstan?

How much of the revenue do you take from them and why?

What relationship does Meloman have with other distribution companies?

What genres of the film do you tend to buy?

How does the company comply with the articles of Cinema Law with respect to Language? What is your mechanism for translating and subtitling your Kazakh language films?

General questions to the interviewees:

How would you define the Kazakh cinema? What is Kazakh cinema for you?

To your opinion, what are the main challenges that film production has to face with?

What are advantages/disadvantages of working in public/private sector?

What film genres are popular in Kazakhstan and why?

Will new Cinema Law contribute to position Kazakhstan in the world map?

How and to what extent the Cinema Law change the cultural policy in Kazakhstan?

Appendix E. Consent form for the interviewees.



University
of Glasgow

CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that Assel Kamza is collecting data in the form of _____ for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymous if requested.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's name and email contact: Assel Kamza, a.kamza.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor's name and email contact: 1) Philip Schlesinger, Philip.Schlesinger@glasgow.ac.uk 2) Lynn Whitaker, Lynn.Whitaker@glasgow.ac.uk

Department address: 13 Professor's Square, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, Glasgow University Campus, The United Kingdom, G12 8QQ, tel.: 01413305036.

Appendix F. Participant Information Letter

Participant Information Letter

My name is Assel Kamza and I am researching “Kazakh cinema and the nation: a critical analysis” for my doctoral thesis at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, UK. My research is funded by the JSC Centre for International programs, Kazakhstan. My research data will be based on interviews with relevant stakeholders in Kazakh screen production as well as information gathered by my attendance at film festivals.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could make a contribution to this research. I would be grateful if you would consent to giving me an interview conducted face to face or by any other method suitable to you, such as Skype or any other instant messenger. You will be asked to give signed consent for the interview and for its later use in the thesis and later publications. You have my assurance that your contribution will be anonymous unless you choose otherwise.

Қатысушыға ақпараттық хат

Менің аты-жөнім - Әсел Қамза, Ұлыбританиядағы Глазго университетінің докторантымын. Менің диссертациялық жұмысымның тақырыбы - «Қазақ киносы және ұлт: сыни сараптама». Ғылыми зерттеуімді халықаралық «Болашақ» стипендиялық бағдарламасы қаржыландырады. Зерттеу нысаны - Қазақстан кино өндірісіне қатысты шығармашылық-технологиялық үдерістер, мүдделі тараптардың ұйымдастырушылық жұмысы және Еуразия кинофестивалінің ұлт құрылысына және заманауи кинематография ілгерілеуіне әсері.

Сіздің бұл зерттеу жұмысына тигізер септігіңіз бетпе-бет сұхбат немесе өзіңізге қолайлы кез келген әлеуметтік желі, Скайп арқылы сұхбат беру жолымен жүзеге асады. Сізден сұхбат беруге және ондағы ақпараттарды диссертациямда, ғылыми мақалаларда пайдалануға жазбаша келісім беру сұралады. Сіздің сұхбатыңыз, егер басқа нұсқаны таңдамасаңыз, жасырын түрде өтеді.

Информационное письмо

Меня зовут Асель Камза, я - докторант Университета Глазго в Великобритании. Тема моей научной работы - «Казахское кино и нация: критический анализ». Исследование финансируется международной стипендиальной программой «Болашақ». Объектом исследования являются творческо-технологические процессы, касающиеся кинопроизводства в Казахстане, организационные работы заинтересованных сторон и оценка влияния Евразийского кинофестиваля на развитие нациостроительства и современного кинематографа.

Ваш вклад в это исследование будет отмечен в форме интервью при личной встрече, или при помощи других приемлемых для вас способов, таких, как Skype или любых других мессенджеров. Вас попросят дать письменное согласие на интервью и последующее использование данных в диссертации и

в дальнейших публикациях. Ваше интервью будет анонимным, если вы не пожелаете иные варианты общения.

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